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When I woke up I was lyin' on the floor in a mess of rags and filth. I looked up and Kiley was sittin' on the chair facin' me. His eyes were bugged in death and his necktie was a bright red that started to lengthen and dripped twice in his lap.

BY
JOE GORES

DOWN AND OUT

In San Francisco, when you've stopped shaving every day and your hand shakes reaching for that first quick one, they'll say you're headed south of Market. It's like going north of the bridge on Clark Street in Chicago or down Washington Avenue to Second in Minneapolis; liquor stores outnumber everything but pawnshops and at night only the bars are bright. Cops work in pairs here, and winos sleep on street corners until the wagon takes them to the drunk tank at Kearny and Washington. Any night, south of Market, you can

find them: the snowbirds, the drunks, the whores, the bullies . . . and the men who are scared so deep down in their guts that they're almost beyond fear.

The men like me.

I was sitting in a slophouse on Third over a tired piece of pie and a cup of muddy jo when I saw two guys arguing outside. The grey-haired one wore a white shirt, sport jacket, and rumpled trousers. His tired whiskey eyes peered from a lined face that had been stepped on for more years than Williams has been with Boston. The short dapper Mexican sported a blue suit, white shirt and red tie, cowboy boots, and two days' whiskers. One hand waved a nearly empty Tokay bottle; the other tried to fit his new white Stetson onto the old bird's head.

Just as I came out he spread his arms wide and ran into a parking meter. Then he tried to drag the old guy down Third.

"G'wan. You got me in trouble once already. I ain't goin' down there with you."

After the Mexican had wandered off, he saw me and hollered, "Hey, sport!"

Coming over, he added: "I had just enough for a good bottle of Tokay, and then I went and give it to that Mexican. Found out afterwards that boy has plenty of glue—folding glue. Struck me as prob'ly a swell feller when he's sober." His faded blue eyes stared worriedly after the Mexican. "Hate to see that boy go south of Market with that glue. He don't know this town, an' what the hell is he gonna find down there except trouble?"

I couldn't answer that one. Figuring it for a touch, and being a soft-hearted slob, I separated myself from a couple aces.

"Here, Pops. Have yourself a ball."

"I didn't ask for this." His face got wistful as he palmed the two bucks. "Name's Kiely, sport—live at the Wessley on 22nd and Third. Ever out that way . . ."

He stopped there as if afraid of pushing it too much, treated me to a gentle smile, and slouched off. Just another grifter among the Third Street juice heads and happy girls and silent drifting Negroes. In the bars I found the usual sad guys sucking away on draft beer with their pockets full of dust and their heads full of ghosts. I took in a triple feature, any seat in the house for 35¢.

Around Midnight I started hiking out Folsom toward the Mission District where I lived. In a dark deserted stretch between the puddles of streetlight, a lean black 1956 Lincoln slid up to the curb, its exhaust murmuring poh-poh-poh in the cold night air. A heavy blue-chinned face with a fat cigar screwed in the middle of it was poked out the window.

"Give ya a lift, boyfriend?"

Before I could say no, the door

was open and the short fat guy who belonged to the face was on the curb beside me. A switchblade gouged my belt buckle.

"In, boyfriend."

His blue chin joggled the spitty cigar up and down like a frayed brown finger waggling. Under his blue topcoat were stuffed twenty-five extra pounds of soft Italian cooking, but with the knife he was plenty tough for me just then.

His partner took the Lincoln down Eighth with the lights to Bryant, then cut left towards the waterfront. He had the build of a fast light-heavy, wavy blond hair, and cold blue eyes that seemed to focus on something a foot behind me.

"Call me Emmy," suggested the stubby Italian, working the cigarette lighter nonchalantly. This was old stuff to him.

"Listen," I said, "You have the wrong guy. You made a mistake."

Leaning forward, Emmy spoke around me.

"He says we make a mistake, Earl."

Earl didn't say anything. Settling back against the cushions, Emmy announced with finality: "We ain't made no mistake, boyfriend . . . Right, Earl?"

Earl went right on not saying anything. He swung the Lincoln into the dead end on First Street across from the squat grey mass of the Seaman's Union, and parked facing out towards Harrison with dimmed lights.

"What's the handle, kid?" he asked.

"Rick. I told you, you got the wrong guy."

"Make it easy on yourself, kid. Tell us about Kiely."

"I never even heard of him." I was sweating by then.

On the corner was a dive with a red neon sign above the door. Two guys came out, glanced incuriously at the Lincoln, and angled across Harrison. I didn't move. Beside me Emmy made wet noises on the end of his cigar like a baby with a new bottle.

"We knew he was in town." Earl's voice sounded detached, as if he was trying to remember the last man he'd gunned down. "Tonight we spotted him talking with you on Third, but we lost him."

"Then we make you again comin' outta the flics," put in Emmy.

"Hell," I said, remembering. "Was that Kiely? He's just a juice-head, bummed me for a buck."

"Did he say where he lived?"

After a second I said in a steady voice, "No—nothing. Not even thanks."

Earl began to drum on the steering wheel with his fingers. Then, abruptly, "Okay, kid, I guess you're straight. Emmy, let him out."

As I slid out, Emmy shoved his face close to mine. With his saggy jowls and droopy outer eye-lids, he resembled a well-fed bloodhound.

"Right down Harrison without trying to look-see the license plates, boyfriend."

"Can the musical comedy act and get to hell in here," snapped Earl.

I told him thanks and he laughed and I walked down Harrison feeling like a tin duck in a shooting gallery with his pulley broken, even though I knew it was silly. No one shot at me. After half a block I stopped to light a cigarette: the Lincoln was out of sight. Cupping the match my hands shook, but not nearly as much as Keily's would have shaken.

The Wessley was an upstairs flophouse two and a half blocks from the Third Street precinct station where the bus had dropped me. When I paused under the single lightbulb over the hotel's street entrance, a big car slid in to the curb in the next block and cut its lights. Nobody got out. I had the street to myself.

There was a worn matting on the creaky stairs and the stuffy office was empty. Ajax Kiely, by the register, had room twenty-seven. The Wessley smelled old and worn out, like a tired miner after a day in the pits. A strip of faded maroon carpeting wandered down the narrow hall and around two right-angle turns to dead-end at twenty-seven. Nobody did anything when I knocked.

I went downstairs, outside, and into the saloon next door. It was an old-fashioned place with high ceilings; plain heavy glass bowls filled with hard-boiled eggs were set out on the mahogany bar. On my side of the plank were two Italian laborers, on the other a balding heavy-set barkeep who looked like he could have stopped Dempsey in his day. In that neighborhood he probably had a blackjack on his hip and a loaded .32 under the beer cooler.

In the mirror I was broad and tired and white around the mouth, friendly as a truck driver out of work. It was nearly two a.m.

"What's yours, Jack?"

"I want to talk with a guy named Kiely."

"Kiely?" He made it sound like the name of an unknown animal.

"Right . . . Ajax." I pointed at the ceiling and waggled my thumb like Matt Dillon with his six-gun. "Number twenty-seven, upstairs."

"Uh huh." His dirty towel moved the dust around on top of the bar. "You better go ask at the kitchen."

Through a connecting doorway was a darkened delicatessen with another doorway in the rear from which shone dingy yellow light. I could smell garlic and steak frying. The tiny cluttered kitchen barely held a black iron cook stove and a fat Italian woman with a fine assortment of chins. Her hair was pulled back in a whispy bun and her stabbing blue eyes hadn't

missed a buck since we went off the gold standard.

"I ain't doing anything but sandwiches tonight."

"Fellow name of Kiley lives upstairs in twenty-seven. Has he been around?"

"You from a finance company?"

I wrinkled up my nose without answering, as if someone had hung a herring under it.

She flopped over the sizzling steak, cut it enough to peek in, took down a heavy platter and reached for a loaf of French bread with an economy of motion that would have shamed an efficiency expert.

As she cut the bread she said: "Harry had some trouble out front last week. He don't like to answer questions much." She shoved the platter with the sandwich on it into my hands. "Tell the guy on the end he owes me a buck. Kiely's out back."

Beyond a washed-out green curtain at the end of the tavern was a big barren room with long tables pushed back against the walls to open the unvarnished floor for Saturday night dancing. There were wooden booths along the left wall and in the second one was Kiely, sopping up gravy from a cleaned plate with a slice of French bread.

When I slid in across from him he looked up and grinned.

"Didn't expect you tonight, sport." He gestured at the plate. "Man hadn't ought to never neglect his diet. Learned that when I was batting .300 with the Chi Sox."

I said: "Listen, there's something—"

"When the war come along I got out of baseball, sport—enlisted in the Air Force and captained a flying squad in Australia." He hacked his piece of apple pie in two and stuffed half of it in his face. Bed-brown flakes of crust spilled down his shirt front. "Ain't ever liked a Limey since then. Bought a jug of juice off one on the bus, I did, for ten bucks American. When I opened it I found it was tea. Since then—"

I repeated patiently, "Two guys. They want you. I thought you might be faintly interested, but I wouldn't want to interrupt you."

His fork hit the plate and spanged off on the floor. In the bar the juke box started blaring.

"Two guys, huh? Earl an' Emmy, ain't it? By God, they did it again." Suddenly his words were bullets. "What's your angle, sport? How'd they slice it for you?"

"To hell with you, Mr. Kiely."

I started to slide out of the booth but he grabbed my arm.

"Sorry, sport. It started in Philly and it's gone through New York and Chicago and Miami and New Orleans and L.A. Spend three years on the bum with death lookin' over your shoulder, an' it does sompthin' to you."

"Okay, Pops. Forget it. I get these impulses."

He nodded.

"I seen this Earl kill a man in Philly. There was a lotta money an' I got it, never mind how. When I shake him it'll be women an' likker an' fancy hotels an' flunkies shinin' old Kiely's shoes . . ." His voice stopped, lowered. "You ever seen eighty grand, sport?"

He clawed open the top buttons of his shirt and I saw a small leather pouch slung around his neck on a cord and hung under one arm. He took out a flat metal key with the number 181 stamped in it and laid it reverently on the table between us.

"There she is, sport. Safe deposit box. But only old Kiely knows the bank an' the city an' what name she's under."

There wasn't much for me to say. Looking at the key lying in one of the rings his water glass had made, I thought about what a man might do with eighty grand. But I remembered Earl's eyes and competent killer's hands, and was glad I wasn't Kiely.

When I looked up he was watching me.

"I know, sport: you're thinkin' that Kiely's eighty grand ain't done him a hell of a lot of good. You're right. It ain't." His blue eyes sharpened with hate, like a hustler's when the guy she's been working for drinks turns out to be a John from the vice squad. "But once you start runnin' it ain't easy to stop. An' it ain't just the money, neither; Earl needs me dead cause I can finger him for that old Philly kill."

"Look, Pops," I said suddenly, "Give me until tomorrow morning and I can raise maybe a double sawbuck to get you out of town."

He regarded me for a long time without speaking; then one forefinger slid the key across the table to me.

"I got a feelin', sport. Gimme this tomorrow mornin' at the bus depot. Now c'mon up to the room an' tell me about Earl."

"I don't want that key, Pops."

"This way, sport, if he . . . finds me tonight I can't tell him where it is, 'cause I won't know. I tell ya, I got a feelin'."

So I stuck the key in my pocket and followed him up the back stairs. His room was typical of a Third Street flophouse: faintly sour with dead cigar smoke and narrow as a reformer's mind, with newspapers cluttering the unmade bed just inside the door. In front of the window was a worn-out easy chair that had been there when Rockne was coach at Notre Dame. The thin brown shade was drawn and the closet door stood open just enough to let a mouse out. The nap of the brown patterned rug was thin as a depression dime. It was a room to have nightmares in.

"They'd give a lot to know that what they want is right here," said Kiely, switching on the light. I turned back to slide the night chain into its metal groove and he added, in a sudden high breathless voice,

"When I was playin' ball with a fellow in Philly name of Moran..."

He stopped abruptly, with a sigh. As I started to turn from the door there was the splitting painless sensation of being struck on the head: then there was nothing at all.

Obscenely gay printed flowers were strewn across the sides of the cheap tin waste basket and the brown carpet tickling my nose smelled mouldy. A very large wasp was monotonously sinking its stinger into the base of my skull. When I rolled over I was not ashamed to groan. Kiely regarded me thoughtfully from the broken-down easy chair.

"What the hell?" I said to him. "What the hell?"

Somehow I answered the bell for the tenth. My shoe skittered something across the rug to rattle against the wainscoting. It resembled the knife that Emmy had held against my belly earlier that evening. I remembered the cigar smoke odor and looked at Kiely. His shirt wore a new red necktie. As I watched, the end of the necktie lengthened and dripped twice in his lap. I'd fingered Kiely after all.

Outside a lightly-touched siren growled throatily. I recalled that the precinct station was only two and a half blocks away. An anonymous phone call, probably. Hide the knife. I drifted over, picked it up, and slid it into my pocket. There was blood on my jacket sleeve. *What the hell?* I thought then, *I can't hide Kiely.*

"Pardon me," I said aloud.

Feet pounded up the echoing stairs by the front desk. I went around Kiely to lean against the window. It burst outward with a lovely shattering sound, taking the shade with it. Shockingly fresh air, heavy with mist, stung my sluggish brain.

A heavy fist made the thin door quake and a voice like Tarzan's bellowed: "Police! Open up in there!"

From the window sill I cannonballed into darkness. My heels crunched in a pail and flipped it over, landing me tail-first in a shower of stinking garbage. I dodged through a junk-littered yard to the back fence, and, though my legs were wobbly, made the top on the first try. When I paused to curse the slivers in my hands, a flashlight beam from Kiely's window probed the yard frantically and voices shouted, so I went on over.

The ground was low and wet, the night foggy. At the bottom of a shallow muddy embankment I found railroad tracks. They led me to the 25th Street intersection; here I turned uphill, away from Third, and climbed towards the Potrero Terrace Housing Projects. The cement government prefabs waited emptily for the wreckers to come, grey and cold and ghostly in the

swirling mist. I found a pay phone and called a Yellow.

Sweating out my cab in the shadow of a big warehouse at the foot of Connecticut, I rolled my jacket into a tight bundle with the blood inside and the knife still in the pocket. When a prowl car rocketed past on Army Street, siren and spot blazing, I didn't try to flag it down.

My shoes echoed hollowly on the cement ramp of the all-night auto park in the basement of the Bellingham Hotel on Sixth and Mission. A husky Negro about my own age was dozing on a cot in the bright cramped office by the foot of the ramp. He resembled Harry Belafonte and had the name of the garage stitched in neat red script across the chest of his blue mechanic's coveralls.

His sharp eyes opened, focussed, lit up.

"Man," he said, "Little cool to be running around outside without a jacket. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, then reached for the desk drawer where the bottle was stored. I shook my head.

"Where you flopping now, Nat?"

"Dump over on Geary and Octavia. Why?"

"I need a pad for a few days."

He took a key from his pocket, dropped it on my open palm.

"Third house from the corner, yellow with lots of gingerbread. Front room on the ground floor. Don't let the landlady see you, man. She's death on Whites bein' in there. Bad trouble?"

"Bad enough. A guy got dead." When his eyes widened I added: "I didn't do it, Nat."

"Man," he said softly, "I didn't ask. You just naturally can't stay out of trouble." He stood up to reach an army field jacket down off a hook screwed into the unpainted wall. "Be sunup when I leave here, won't need this."

I laid my jacket on the chair. "Can you get rid of this thing, Nat? There's blood on it, and a knife in the pocket."

"This the knife that—"

"Ya."

"I'll call you a cab, man; you look like hell."

It was four o'clock.

A little Negro girl skipped down the sidewalk, wearing a bright red cloth coat, her hair sticking almost straight out in two tight black braids. She was happy. Behind her came three Negro boys and one Chinese boy, all dressed in gaudy windbreakers and brown corduroy trousers. Two of them carried school books. Golden sunlight slanted across the sidewalk; no town is lovelier than San Francisco when the sun shines. Nat came up the street from the bus stop, whistling. Under his arm were school books, too; law school on the G. I. Bill.

Over steaming coffee fresh off his hot plate I told the whole story, ending with the key in my hand. He shook his head.

"Old soft-hearted Rick," he said. "And eighty-grand."

"When you went to warn him you didn't know about any eighty grand. How the devil you figure those cats found the old man's pad?"

"Earl didn't believe that I didn't know Kiely's place," I said bitterly, "So they just followed me out there. It must have been the Lincoln I noticed pulling in down the street just after I got there."

"So they read the register, jimmy Kiely's lock, and wait in the closet. When Kiely says that what they want is in the room—bingo!"

"Not they," I corrected. "Just Emmy, and I bet Earl waited outside in case Kiely got away. He never would have knocked off the old man without making sure of the money first. When I woke up the room had hardly been disturbed."

Nat poured out more coffee and leaned back on the bed. Suddenly he sat bolt upright, making the springs whine protestingly.

"Hey, man, just before Kiely got it . . . what's he say?"

"Something about Philly and a ballplayer named Moran. Nothing there that . . ."

I stopped and looked at the key in my hand.

"That's it," shouted Nat excitedly, "He was plenty sharp. The loot is in safe deposit box 181 at some bank in Philly under the name Moran."

"There're a lot of banks in Philly."

"We can beat that. The big thing now is that this cat Earl is going to realize that Kiely probably gave you something that he wants. Better stick right here, Rick. I'll poke around tonight before work, see what I can find out."

Later, as he was at the door, I called softly, "Nat—thanks."

His grin was huge. "Old army buddies—and eighty grand." Then he laughed and went out the door.

I never saw him again.

Time passed slowly. The papers gave Kiely's killing the usual skid-row treatment—a couple inches on page two. The Giants were looking good and Silky Sullivan had dropped dead in the Derby. They were drafting 10,000 men this month.

The floor wore a green carpet and someone had laid rose pink paint over the wallpaper. I found a jug in the closet. How many banks were there in Philly with safe deposit boxes? A team of patient men could cover them in time.

By eight-thirty the bottle was dry. I walked through the fog to the Chinese store in the 1100 block of Geary, averting my face when autos passed. In the hall at Rick's place a colored teen-ager was pleading with a colored woman in her thirties in front of her open door. The hall

smelled like the halls in every cheap rooming house in the world. They stopped talking to stare at me with flat observant eyes from across the racial gulf that only love or friendship can really span.

I had a few belts and switched on radio station KOBY: Jerry Lee Lewis and Fats Domino, everybody rockin' and rollin' and havin' a ball. Sometime before midnight I fell asleep in the chair.

When a newscaster awoke me at six a.m. I wished that he hadn't:

> Nathaniel Webster Doobey, 28, colored, address unknown, was found by a cruising patrol car early this morning in a doorway off Jessie Street behind the Seventh Street Post Office. There were eleven knife wounds in his chest and abdomen, and four knuckles of his right hand were broken, indicating he had defended himself until overcome by loss of blood. Doobey died in the police ambulance without regaining consciousness. Robbery has been advanced as the motive behind the brutal slaying . . .

I took a hooker from the bottle for my hangover, then doused my head in cold water at the washstand in the corner. The single weak bulb over the sink gave me back a yellow and terrified face from the wavy mirror. It hadn't been a robbery; I was next. Maybe he'd spilled where I was hiding. Run.

Nat's dresser gave me enough money to get to Philadelphia. His sport jacket was just a little tight across the shoulders and I fitted into his grey flannel slacks. A cruising cab picked me up in front of the Cardinal Hotel on Geary and Van Ness.

The one-way fare to Philly left me nine bucks. I tried to concentrate on a magazine at the Greyhound bus station on Seventh while I waited for the bus, but it didn't work. Dead faces kept blurring the pictures. I'd fingered Kiely. Earl had probably worked on Nat personally; he was the type who couldn't quit cutting once he was started. Nat had planned a law practice in the Fillmore District, with an office on O'Farrell Street. They shouldn't have left him bleeding his life away in a dirty gutter. My hands had shredded the magazine. I tossed the woman some change and walked out into the waiting room.

They were all people going places, intent on business or a vacation, people laughing or sad or not giving a damn. But going places. Then I admitted it: I wasn't going anywhere. Not yet I wasn't. San Francisco was my town, and somewhere in that town were Earl and Emmy, searching, asking questions. They would be silently noted—and remembered.

The evening rush hour crowds were thinning when I stopped to light a cigarette for the legless man

who peddles pencils on Market Street. He has more of my dimes than the phone company. My feet hurt. The legless man rested on his neat square castored board, never turning his heavy handsome head but cataloguing every person who passed. As I bent over him with the lighter he said:

"The fat one came out of Western Union two hours ago, Rick. He had a Yellow Cab waiting."

At the cab stand by the bus depot it took me half an hour to find the guy I wanted. He was a tall stooped number with brown hair and a Los Angeles vocabulary. Five bucks made him use it.

"Ya, this guy you're talking about, like he bar-hopped down around Third and Folsom quite a while. Kept me waiting, Clyde, like he didn't stop for a drink. Looking for someone, y'know what I mean, Clyde?"

"Then where'd he go?"

"Ya, like I finally dumped him at the Rockwell on Jones and Eddy. Cheap, Clyde . . . no tip. I don't dig that jazz. You a private peeper or something, Dads?"

When I went away he reburied his nose in his movie magazine as if it was a schooner of beer. The fat man running the newspaper stand in the middle of the block stopped me to say that Stan wanted to talk to me. I figured it might be important.

Stan is a steady honest Bohunk from the Old Country who's sold papers in Market and Kearny since I was old enough to remember. He and his fat Polish wife have had me over to dinner a couple times. He was wearing a blue sweater, huddled up in the corner of his square green booth as if he was cold.

"This Nat, he always stop here buy paper on way home from work. Then maybe two hours sleep, go college." His faded eyes blinked, once, rapidly. "I hear this fellows you look for do this thing to Nat."

"That's right, Stan."

He nodded.

"Tall one, hard eyes, he walk by here maybe two three hours ago. Down Third he go."

"Looking for me."

"Other one—fat one . . ." He blew out his cheeks like a squirrel's and patted his belly above his gold watch chain. "Rockwell Hotel bar, Eddy Street, there he drinks. The Lincoln in the parking lot is, between Larkin and Leavenworth on Eddy. No attendant."

He wouldn't take my four bucks.

"You good boy, Rick. I think you do one thing a man have to do sometimes. I tell Mama you ask after her."

"You tell her that, Stan."

When I went on the shrouded streets threw the sound of my impatient foosteps back at me. Men of chilled smoke hurried by in search of warm rooms and good drinks and maybe soft women to make them human again. On Al-

catraz Island the foghorn bellowed desolately about being out in the Bay on such a night. Swirled pearl hazed the streetlights. Somewhere in that murk was Earl, moving as a hungry cat moves, his fist full of bills and his flat blue eyes full of death.

After checking out the Lincoln I called Emmy at the Rockwell bar. His voice was mushy, as if it was being strained through one of his wet chewed cigars.

"Ya?"

In a high rapid staccato I said: "You one of the guys looking for a joker named Rick?"

"Ah . . ." His ponderous brain moved around inside his thick skull like a fullback at a ballet lesson. "Ya, I—ah . . . wanta talk to him."

"You talked to a shine last night on Jessie Street. That kind of finger is going to cost you."

He breathed cautiously into the phone, finally said:

"You got something on him we pay good."

"Okay. Meet me at the '76' station on Franklin and Pine in twenty minutes. Bring a car and be ready to travel. I'll talk when I see some green."

"I oughtta wait until—"

"This Rick is checking out tonight. He's got his mitts on something big. Be there." I hung up.

The narrow parking lot was sandwiched between two red brick office buildings that must have seen the '06 'quake. It was dark and only held a dozen cars. When Emmy waddled up he was panting and sweat glinted on his forehead. I waited until he was bent over the door lock, then came out from between the Lincoln and the wall.

I judo chopped his shoulder with a force that numbed my hand. He sprawled sideways against the Lincoln, his hand dipping under the blue topcoat and coming out to flick a deadly steel finger at me. The blade slid white-cold across my hand, missing the tendons. Then my fingers locked around his wrist. I broke his left thumb when it tried to gouge my eye.

For thirty seconds we hung there, motionless as flies mating, while the veins swelled on our necks and the sweat began to burn my eyes. Then Emmy grunted and gave back a step. I bent him across the hood and turned his hand in toward his own stomach. He sobbed. His foot growled on the gravel. We slid over sideways against the fender. Our arms writhed like snakes: then his wrist twisted with my grip and my hand thudded against his belly.

Emmy stopped panting and let his hands drop to his sides. He stared down, dumbly. The handle of his new switchblade was a grotesque horn growing from the center of his lower abdomen.

"Oh Jesus!" There was a terrible urgent despair in his voice. The words were not a curse. "Oh Jesus Christ!"

His right hand groped for sup-

port, making opaque smears on the black polished hood of the Lincoln. The backs of his fingers were matted with dark hair. Harsh noises came from his throat and he sat down on the gravel suddenly, like a fat man at a picnic. I backed out from between the cars, unable to look away.

From the entrance of the lot came a coarse male voice, whiskey-burred: "This is the one."

I sprang back between the cars and huddled over Emmy, clamping my hand over his mouth to shut off the slow agonized sounds.

"This—fog!" came a woman's loose voice. "Which—car is it? Down at the end by the Lincoln?"

My fingertips gently touched the switchblade's cold handle.

"That ain't it." Their long shadows danced on the gravel. They picked the car on the other side of the Olds against which I was leaning. I released a long breath and let go of the knife. The woman was giggling drunkenly; there was sudden movement and slopping kissing noises. Finally their light blinked on, the motor grumbled, and the car pulled out with its wipers snickering at the haze.

A warm tickle made me look down and see blood; my hand jerked back from Emmy's face as if it had been burned.

He stared at me in the faint light.

"Hey . . . hey . . . boyfriend . . ."

Then his lips blew some small pink sad bubbles and he died. His glassy eyes regarded me like a pair of thoughtful cocktail onions. I took a deep breath and began.

When I stood up the knife was in one hand, blade glistening, and his hotel key was in the other. I walked over four cars and threw up against the door of someone's new Ford.

Here at the Rockwell I came straight through the lobby without glancing at the desk, bouncing the room key in my hand. No one seemed to notice me. I took the stairs up here to the third floor and found this room.

That was an hour ago. Maybe the cops have found Emmy by now and loaded him on the meat wagon. Or maybe Earl found him first, got into the Lincoln, and drove quietly away. But I don't think so.

I think Earl will be up. If he's found Emmy he'll be moving warily now, looking back over his shoulder into the fog. Because he'll know then that I'm not a frightened wino like Kiely or an inoffensive guy like Nat. He'll know that only one of us can live.

The knife is held low along my side, the way I learned on the streets out in the Mission District as a kid. When the door swings open I will be hidden for the instant it will take to slide the blade into Earl's kidneys . . . if he hasn't found Emmy.

There is the clang of the elevator

doors: the boy is saying, "Good night, sir."

Silence.

Is it Earl, padding down the hall on noiseless feet like the tiger I used to watch at Fleishaker Zoo on Sunday afternoons? Does he know? In my mouth is the taste of fear, as if I have been chewing on a brass cartridge case. I am so frightened I am beyond fear: I am almost calm.

The key is in the lock! It is Earl! In a dozen seconds I'll know if he's found Emmy and is prepared for me.

In a dozen seconds . . .

If I'm alive.

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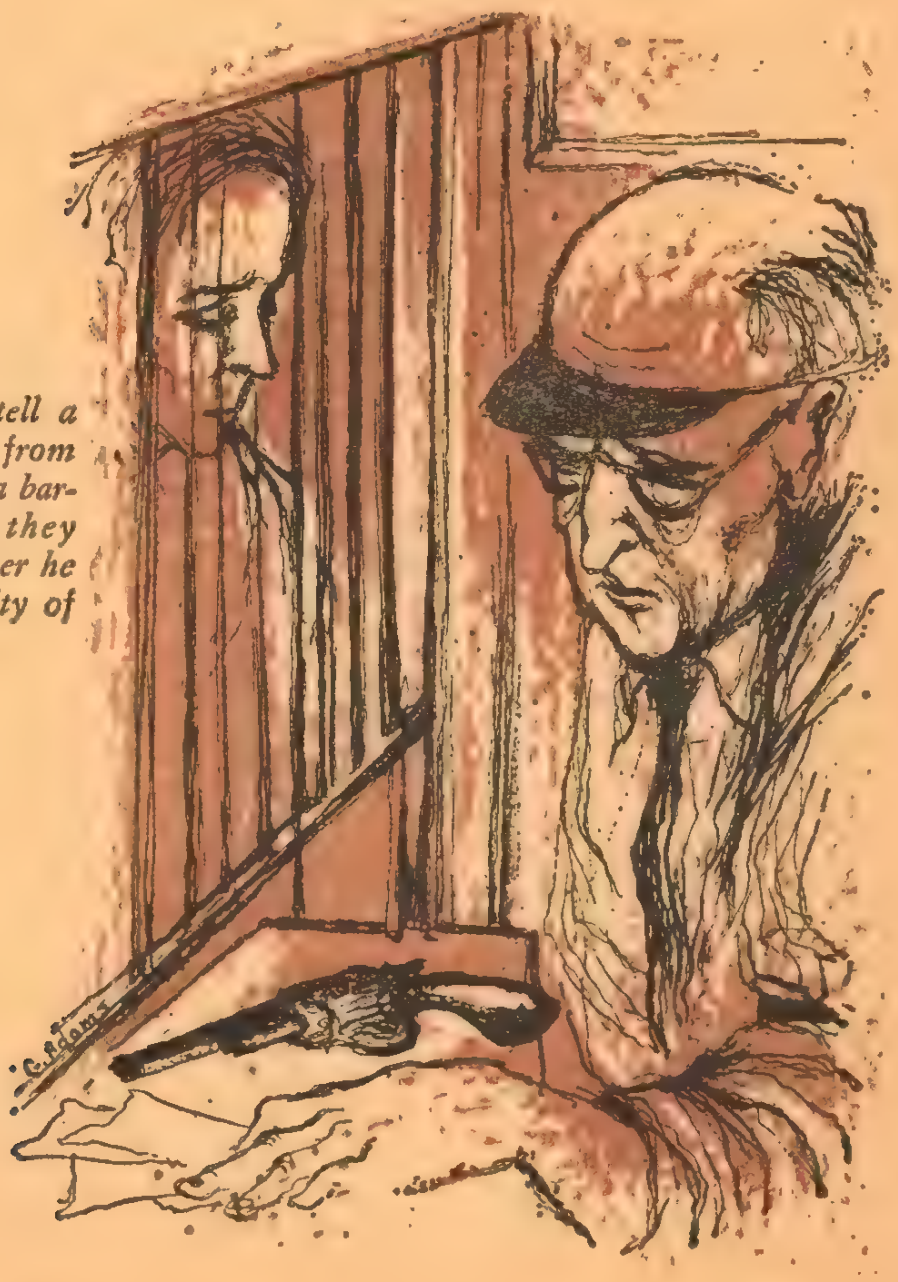
THE BARGAIN-MASTER

BY
BOB
BRISTOW

Pawnbrokers can tell a lot about a man from the way he strikes a bargain. Sometimes they can even tell whether he is innocent or guilty of murder.

ABE COHEN pushed a stubby finger across the newsprint, carefully checking the known details about the murder. He was very tired and the glow from the hanging green shaded lamp above his desk made reading difficult. Abe pulled his glasses down to the end



of his nose, paused with his finger on one magnified line.

The policeman had not been able to give an accurate description of the man before he died, but he described the gun as a long barreled .38 caliber revolver. So, Abe thought, there are thousands of long barreled .38 caliber revolvers. Why believe this one is the one that killed the policeman?

He read on, tilting the newspaper toward the light. The revolver, the paper said, had white pearl grips and the barrel was rusted on top.

Abe Cohen's shoulders sagged as he pushed the paper aside. He took the revolver in his small hands and studied it with care. Pearl hand grips. So lots of guns have pearl grips. A brown hue dulled the barrel. Abe ran his fingers over the thin scale of rust, his keen sense of touch making up for the tiredness of his eyes. The description fitted too well. The gun that he had bought from Danny Hancock this morning.

Abe closed his eyes, resting them from the light. Danny had come noiselessly into the pawn shop, had crept up close behind Abe and put the gun against his back. Abe let out a shriek that was quickly smothered by Danny's fierce laughter.

"You crazy kid. That's how people get killed. You know that?" Abe feigned exasperation.

Danny shrugged, still grinning. He pushed the revolver across the counter. "How much for the gun, Abe?" he asked.

Abe reached for the gun, mechanically examining the chamber to make certain it was empty. He turned the cylinder around, tested the trigger action. Then he tore a small piece of white paper from a pad, slipped it in place and aimed the gun toward the light. He peered down the barrel. Abe couldn't see well enough to judge. "Barrel's pitted," he said.

"It is not," Danny said. "I checked it myself."

"It's dirty," Abe said.

"So clean it."

Abe whirled the cylinder in the gun. A man didn't need to have a certificate of ownership in this state, but Abe was uneasy about the gun.

Perhaps because he knew that Danny Hancock was only seventeen and worked around the barbershops as a shine boy, waiting for the draft to call him. Danny couldn't get a better job. Why train a man only to have him snatched away when's learned his job, the personnel managers always said. So Danny waited, bumming around the street, doing odd jobs, very close to trouble, but so far just on the safe side. Danny Hancock hadn't owned this gun for long. That much Abe knew.

"Danny, where you get the gun?"

"Oh . . . come on, Abie . . . don't go john law on me."

Abe studied the boy. Clean face. A good face with only one small

knife scar on the cheek. A well muscled boy, but a little small for his age. Best snooker player in the block. Good card player. Well brushed teeth. Honest eyes. Good boy.

"Okay . . ." Abe said, "get it out of here." He waved at the gun.

"I come to sell it," Danny protested.

"So I asked you for the story. You got smart with me, Danny. I don't like that, so I don't buy the gun."

"I bought it from a guy," Danny confessed.

"Says you. Bill of sale maybe you got?"

"Bill of sale my hind foot. I give him seve . . . That's none of your business. I got it cheap and I want to sell it. The guy needed the money."

"So why didn't he bring it to me like you are doing? Why would he sell it to you cheap?"

"He was drunk." Danny rubbed the scar on his face impatiently.

"So maybe you stole it from him. Maybe didn't pay him anything. Maybe tomorrow the police see I've bought a hot gun. You must be nuts. How do you stay out of jail?"

"I tell you I bought it. I gave the guy seven bucks. He was loaded. He shouldn't get drunk anyway. Maybe it will teach him a lesson. Besides he bought a bottle with the money, so I don't feel bad. If he'd sold it to you, he'd have bought two or three bottles."

"You lie to me, Danny?" Abe's voice was soft.

"No, I don't lie to you."

The reply was sufficient.

"How much you want for the gun?" Abe asked.

Abe turned his back as though disinterested, but watched Danny in the mirror.

Danny clicked his tongue against his teeth. "Well, Abe . . . I don't know. How much will you give?"

Abe turned around frowning severely. "How many times I got to tell you? Danny, never ask how much a pawn broker will give. Then he knows you don't know what the merchandise is worth. See? Then he can name a low price. You raise it two, maybe three bucks and think you got a good deal when he cries and finally pays you. It is stupid. You get taken good. Now . . . how much for the gun, Danny?"

Danny looked him squarely in the eye, set his jaw. "Forty dollars," he said.

"Take the gun," Abe said shoving the revolver across the counter. He started away.

"Wait . . ." Danny spoke at precisely the right moment. Abe smiled. It had been perfect. He turned slowly. "All right," Danny said. "I'll take thirty dollars for the gun. No less. Not a cent."

"Twenty dollars. That's the best I can do. Look at the barrel. It's rusted. Trigger is too tight. Not much gun. Twenty dollars is too much." Abe wagged his head. This

was his game. It had to be played properly. Timing was of utmost importance. It was an art.

Danny hesitated, almost gave in, then managed to hold out. "Sorry," Danny said . . . "Thirty dollars. I'll keep the gun."

Abe let Danny carry the gun almost to the door before he called him back. "Twenty-five. That's all. Twenty-five. Take it or leave it."

Danny examined the gun carefully. He shook his head. "No . . . I'll go twenty-seven."

It filled Abe Cohen's heart with joy. I'll split it with you," he said generously. "Twenty-six dollars for the gun. Now give me the gun. I got work to do. Or get out. Make up your mind."

Danny put the gun on the counter. "It's yours. Twenty-six dollars."

Abe beamed. "Danny . . . you learn good. Sometimes you act like you'll be a business man yet.

Danny laughed, only slightly self-conscious at Abe's remark.

And Abe had paid him. He watched Danny leave, folding the money. Waited until the last moment when he knew he must ask one more time. "Danny . . ."

"Yeah . . ." Danny paused at the doorway.

"You didn't steal it."

"No . . ." Danny said. "It was like I told you."

Abe dropped the gun on the desk and sighed heavily. He knew that Danny didn't have enough respect for the police. Maybe this was the natural attitude of a seventeen year old. It didn't help that Danny's father had died in prison. Abe rubbed his eyes wearily. Danny would not kill a policeman. He would get close to the wrong side of the law, but he wouldn't really cross over. Danny didn't hate. It was probably like Danny had said. He'd bought the gun from a man. Sure, he shouldn't have done it. But he couldn't have known that the man had killed with the gun. He wasn't old enough or wise enough yet to consider these possibilities. To take precautions. To protect himself.

Abe reached for the telephone. There was nothing to do but call the police. They would find Danny and ask him about the gun and Danny would explain. That would be the end of it. Abe dialed slowly. When he heard the number ringing, he hesitated.

"Police Headquarters," a crisp voice said.

"I'm sorry." Abe had sensed that this was wrong. It was a hunch. "I dialed wrong," he said. He pushed the telephone away.

Now he saw it the way the officers would see it. Danny Hancock, son of a convict who died in prison. A boy who had been picked up several times, but released because they had nothing concrete against him. But his face was familiar, just familiar enough. *Where did he get the gun? Bought it from a man.*

Maybe the police wouldn't be-

lieve that. They'd think that Danny had a reason to kill a policeman. They'd say he was like his father. Where were you, Danny Hancock, last night when the policeman was killed? they would ask him. Abe pressed his glasses against his nose. Where *was* Danny last night?

He put his hat on, locked the revolver in the desk drawer, and left through the front entrance.

Abe Cohen was not a happy man. He lived from the profits of a business that capitalized on the misfortunes of others. They came with cherished diamond wedding rings and sold them for money to buy a sack of groceries . . . to pay the gas bill so that a shabby house could be warm again.

They brought radios, televisions, and left them. One very old man had come with a violin, because it was all he had. How tragic it must have been to sell that most loved possession. Abe walked along the empty sidewalk with his thoughts. What did he give the old man for that violin? Surely he paid him well. He wouldn't have bargained close with the old man.

Abe turned a corner. He forced himself to admit that there was another side. There was the Milligan family, for instance. Every month Grady Milligan brought the accordian down to the shop, and every month Abe loaned Milligan thirty-five dollars on the instrument. Just as sure as taxes, Grady Milligan showed up and redeemed the accordian. Abe was always relieved when Milligan showed up, the money clutched tightly in his large fist. It would be terrible if sometime Milligan didn't come.

Abe stopped in front of the apartment house. The front needed a paint job. The street was littered with trash. The sidewalks were cracked. It was, Abe admitted to himself, pretty bad. He climbed the stairway, wheezing, leaning on the banister.

He knocked softly. Footsteps. The door opened a few inches.

"Danny . . ."

Then the door opened wide. "Come in," Danny said.

The room was shabby, ill-kept.

Danny apologized. "I just put Mom to bed. She's not feelin' too good. I haven't had a chance to clean up."

He scooped several empty beer cans and threw them into a cardboard box.

"She had a headache," Danny said.

"Sure," Abe nodded.

Abe knew. Everybody in the neighborhood knew.

"Is she asleep, Danny?"

The boy nodded, deep lines appearing in his face. It was not easy on him.

Abe had a sudden, almost fierce urge to put his arms around the boy's shoulders. He pressed his glasses against his nose instead. "Did you see the paper, Danny?"

"No."

"Where were you last night, Danny?"

The boy frowned, his eyes growing hard. "I thought you came to visit. But it wouldn't be that way, would it? What are you driving at, Abe?"

"The gun."

Danny swallowed quickly. "Was it hot?" Danny's voice was almost inaudible.

"I think it was the gun that killed a policeman."

Danny groaned and covered his face with his hands.

"Danny . . . last night. Tell me where you were."

"Just around. The cashier at the Strand Theatre turned her back to answer the phone and I slipped in. After that . . ."

"Did anybody see you . . . inside maybe?"

"No . . , I wasn't tryin' to make myself seen, you know."

"When was the movie over?"

"Nine-thirty. Somewhere around there."

"Then what? Did you see anybody you knew?"

"No . . . I started home. I was nearly here when this guy stepped out of the alley. He was staggering all over and he pushed the gun in my hands. He says I can have it for ten bucks."

"Did you get a look at him?"

"No . . . just a general look. He was like any other guy with the staggers. I told him I'd give him seven. It was all I had."

"Would you recognize him?"

"No . . ."

"Then you can't account for last night at all."

"It don't look good," Danny said.

"You know what I've got to do, Danny?"

"Give them the gun?"

"Yes."

"Will they get me? I mean . . . oh, brother. I got into it." Danny buried his face in his hands again.

"If you tell the truth, Danny . . ."

"No . . . I've got to run."

Abe walked around the table and dropped his hand on the boy's shoulder. He was very tired. "No, boy," he said. "You can't run."

"You must be kidding. What chance would I have? Can't you see it?"

"You can't run," Abe said shaking his head. "I tell you what. You let Abe think about it. Let Abe see what he can do."

"You wouldn't turn me in?"

"Danny!"

"Okay . . . you let me know. Let me know tonight. But I know my chances. I know what they'd do if they picked me up on this."

Abe left the apartment. There *was* something he could do. He could destroy the pawn tickets. He could throw the gun into the river from the railroad crossing. They'd never find it. He could do this. Or he could tell the police and try to

convince them that Danny wasn't the kind of boy who would kill.

Abe reached the store. He went inside and sat at his desk. No . . . he was not a lawyer. He could argue over a radio or a set of golf clubs, but not a life. His tongue would turn thick and the words would stick in his throat.

Abe opened the drawer and removed the revolver. He glanced at the photograph of his wife, the one made just before the fall that took her away. And his unborn son.

He spoke to the photograph. "Tell me what to do, Celia." He slipped the gun into his pocket.

Abe believed that Danny had told the truth. He could not sacrifice him to a fate tied together by such terrible circumstances. Abe started for the door.

"Twenty-seven dollars," Danny had said. "I'll go twenty-seven dollars." And he had made a profit of nineteen dollars. How well he had played their little game this last time. Abe halted abruptly at the door. Perhaps the police would think about that. Danny was a smart boy. Surely the police would know that Danny would not openly sell a gun which he had used to kill an officer. Was that proof? Wouldn't they say that this made it obvious that Danny was innocent?

No. Maybe they would not say this. Maybe they would say that Danny was very smart. That Danny sold goods to Abe Cohen at the pawn shop nearly every week. They would say that Danny would go ahead and sell the gun because when the gun was found, everybody would say that Danny would have been too smart to sell a gun that had killed a policeman. Yes . . . perhaps they would say this. Then they would ask Danny where he had been last night. What could Danny tell them?

He couldn't prove he had been to the theatre. Sure, he could tell them all about the picture, but they would say that he had seen it some other time. He had no ticket stub to show them. He could not say he had bought the ticket from the pretty girl in the box, because she would not remember. Everybody knew Danny Hancock down on this street. The girl would have remembered.

Abe plodded along the sidewalk, aware of the weight in his pocket. It was very, very heavy. He walked toward the river. He came to the marquee of the Strand Theatre.

Abe paused at the entrance. He looked at the pretty dark-haired girl in the ticket booth. Her face was very bright, happy. Dark eyes. Full lovely lips painted gaily. A pretty smile.

"Hello," Abe said, bending his head, looking over his glasses.

"Hello, Mr. Cohen," she said.

"What is your name?" Abe asked.

"Nancy James," she answered. "Why?"

"Do you know Danny Hancock?"

An expression passed over her face at that moment. But it was too brief, too subtle for the eyes of a tired old man.

"Yes. I know Danny."

"Tell me. Did he come to the movie last night?"

The girl answered quickly. "No, he did not." Her voice left no doubt.

"I see," Abe nodded. "You are sure."

The girl repeated, studying him.

"Very well. That's too bad. It is very bad. Goodnight, Nancy," Abe said solemnly.

He started away. She waited until he was nearly gone. At precisely the right moment she called to him. Abe smiled.

"Yes," he said turning.

"I need this job, Mr. Cohen. But if it's really important . . . Why do you want to know about Danny?"

Abe blinked against the glare of the bright lights.

It was very late when Abe reached the apartment. The lights were out in Danny's room. Suppose Danny had fled? Suppose Danny had not waited?

Hurriedly Abe climbed the stairway. Tomorrow his legs would ache from this. Tomorrow it would not matter.

He knocked at the door, then listened to himself breathing heavily from the swift climb. He heard no footsteps inside the apartment. *Danny had left!*

Abe pounded on the door. "Danny," he called. "Danny, where are you?"

The door opened almost immediately. Danny looked into the hallway over Abe's shoulder. "Come in," he whispered. He turned on the light and they sat down.

"Danny," Abe said, "it was this way . . ."

He told him that Nancy had said she knew he wanted to see the movie, so she deliberately turned her back to let him in. When it was over, she saw him leave. The policeman was killed while Danny was in the movie. The girl would tell the police. They would not hold Danny if they knew that. He didn't need to run.

"She won't help me," Danny said. "Besides, she could get fired for letting me sneak in. She wouldn't do that for me."

"Yes, Danny . . . this girl would. She said so."

"They wouldn't believe it anyway."

"They would, boy. Why are you afraid now?"

"The police might break the story down. Have you told them yet?"

"No . . . I said I'd come back first."

"I'd better run. You'll give me a few hours start."

Abe smiled, though he did not feel like smiling. It was a sad thing.

It was the feeling he always had when he looked at the picture of his wife. "Goodbye, Danny," Abe said. He pushed his glasses against his nose and walked toward the door. His legs were trembling beneath him now. He reached the door, and it was precisely the right time for Danny to call him back. But Danny did not call.

Abe put his foot on the top step and started down slowly. He had failed. Abe did not know where he had gone wrong, but somewhere he had. He reached the landing and turned. He rubbed his eyes beneath the glasses.

"Mr. Cohen ..." The voice came to him, a whisper floating in the darkness.

"Yes, Danny."

"Will they believe me? Will they believe the girl?"

"Yes."

There was a moment of hesitation. Then Danny whirled abruptly and started for his room. "Wait, Mr. Cohen. I'll get my coat."

Danny disappeared inside the apartment. Abe Cohen sighed heavily and wiped his brow with a handkerchief.

That one, he thought, *was awfully close.* He sighed again. *But that's the way a good bargain should be. Yes, indeed.*

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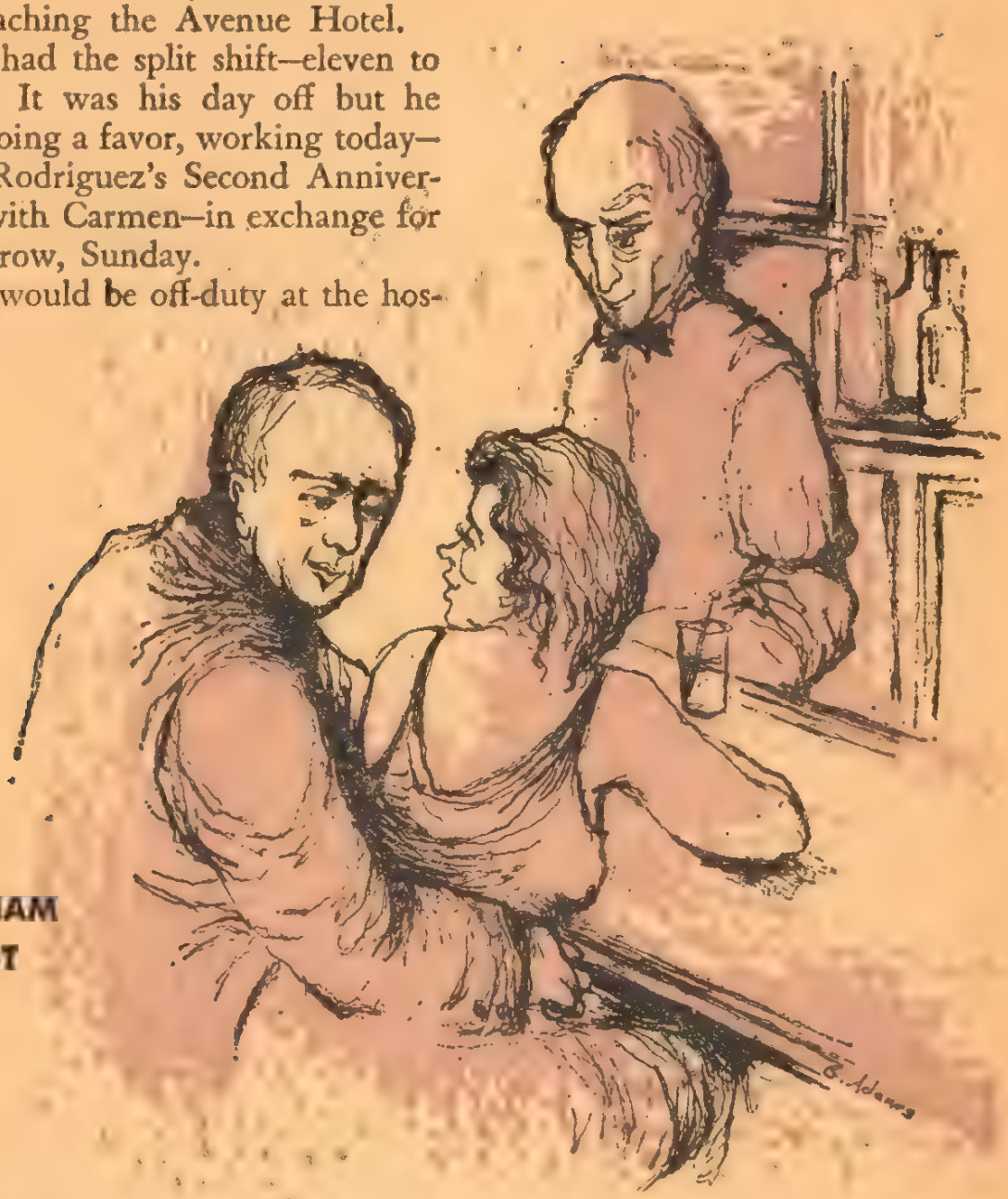
IT STARTED like any other day.

At ten forty-five Jeff was approaching the Avenue Hotel.

He had the split shift—eleven to seven. It was his day off but he was doing a favor, working today—Luis Rodriguez's Second Anniversary with Carmen—in exchange for tomorrow, Sunday.

Jill would be off-duty at the hos-



BY WILLIAM HURST

THE BLONDE IN ROOM 320

The gun exploded right in front of him. It was like a hammer knocking him backwards until all he could feel was the flood of hot searing pain.

pital and they would drive to Brookfield, picnic in the zoo. She had adopted her own special polar bear.

The air crackled with Chicago Autumn as his long gait carried him to the Michigan Boulevard entrance. He waved at the doorman, ashes from his cigarette dropping on the rubber mat that proclaimed "A" in the famous design of the Avenue. An "A" which graced untold thousands of dinner plates, match covers, letter heads, soup spoons, ashtrays, and toilet seat covers.

His size ten and a halfs followed the ashes to the mat. Jeff spun through the revolving doors.

Two thousand rooms. The block-square Avenue was big business. To Jeff it had been good business.

He had first worked there going to college. Now, three years out of the Army, college and Korea behind him, he had been made Junior Assistant Manager.

There were twelve other assistant managers, all the way to Brole, Executive Assistant. There were twenty-five mere room clerks too. Taking into account the assorted cashiers, typists, mail, key, and information clerks—over whom even a *junior* assistant has jurisdiction—Jeff was doing not at all badly for twenty-six.

The hotel was full—automotive-parts dealers' convention. That was a break, it meant a quiet day. With the house full there would be only the inevitable shuffling of keys and mail. Nobody checking in or out.

The events that were to make this day anything but quiet—that were to make it the most fear-ridden of Jeff's life—had yet to come.

White plastic letters, fitted into slots on a big board, listed the day's functions. The automotive people had a banquet for nine hundred at seven o'clock.

That wouldn't affect him. He'd be with Jill thirty minutes later. One of her current fancies, along with polar bears, was folk music. For once she was off on Saturday night, no emergency-room duty, no on-call.

Tomorrow they'd picnic, tonight they'd drink dark beer listening to the wail of a Yugoslavian shepherd to his flock. Or whatever kind of shepherd this singer bleated about.

His flecked eyes continued to sift. Midwest Airlines had a dance on the roof. If he hadn't met Jill, a year ago, he might have stayed for the stewardesses. But he was stuck with a Registered Nurse. Bed-pan hands and all, he rather enjoyed it.

Wedding luncheon, Skyline Ballroom. Sales conference, Seaway Suite. Meeting of the St. Louis Ball-Club that had just won at Wrigley Field.

He noticed some of the players lounging. Slaughter, as always, clamped around a big cigar.

"Lobby-sitters!" his friend Rickerton the bellboy would snort. Be

they Major League stars, permanent guests, call-girls, salesmen, old ladies, wives waiting for husbands, husbands waiting for wives, or husbands just waiting, Rick dismissed them as "Lobby-sitters!"

Jeff smiled, brushed a big hand through brown hair, restored his well-cut features to business-like aspect. Straightened his new striped tie, pulled down his blue suit in back and reported for work.

Brole, his boss, nodded stiffly.

It started like any other day. It kept being any other day for nearly three hours.

Jeff, alternately, stood behind the wood-panelled reservation counter. Sat at the small Assistant Manager's desk next to it. Answered telephones, okayed checks, went up to the Skyline Ballroom to discourage busboys from appropriating champagne. Exchanged small talk with passing guests.

Jill called. She had just assisted at an operation.

"A nose-job, very messy," she said.

Reminded him she'd be ready at seven-fifteen, the folk-singer started at seven-thirty.

He marvelled at North Shore debutantes ("Debu-*tramps*," Jill dubbed them), who could afford a thousand dollars for having their noses bobbed if they were straight. Or straightened if they were bobbed. Or whatever you did to noses.

He read the paper.

He smoked many cigarettes.

Nothing special.

Nothing exciting.

Nothing until the Assistant Manager's phone shrilled at exactly one-forty-five.

Jeff scooped it up, bored. Drummed the fingers of his left hand on the desk-glass.

"Assistant Manager. Jefferson."

"Mr. Jefferson?"

"That's right, Millie." He recognized the Avenue's Chief Operator.

"What you got?"

"The phone's off the hook in 320 . . ."

Jeff knew there had to be more. If that was all, she would have sent a bellboy. He leaned forward expectantly. Stopped his tapping fingers. Put his palm flat.

"And?"

"Well, I think the man in there—a single, Lester Farnham, from Mishawaka, Indiana—automotive—I think he's sick or drunk or something. I heard noises, gasps kind of. The phone's still off . . ."

"How long?" he asked. Not so expectant now, in the Hotel Business drunks were an old story.

"Only three or four minutes, hon. I cut right in when the light came on. Nobody was on the line. Then I heard those noises—muffled like. I checked our information rack and called you right away. Was that alright?"

"Sure, that's fine, Mill. I'll go up. Quiet out here anyway. What's the room again?"

"320, hon, put the phone back, willya?"

"Sure, Mill. Thanks."

He hung up, shaking his head. Millie would say "hon" to Winston Churchill. Well, at sixty she could get away with it.

Normally he would have taken a bellboy. You never knew what you might find. Seeing none, he went alone.

He considered, waiting by the fourteen front elevators—all of which always managed to be someplace else. Millie was not exactly given to excitement. Maybe this—Farnsworth was it?—was really sick.

He played with having to accompany him to a hospital. Jill's was the closest . . .

He patted his right pocket, made sure he had his pass-keys. Lit a cigarette.

Four cars, all empty, clicked open at the same time. Jeff picked the prettiest operator. Asked for Three.

He watched her move her trimly uniformed behind, slide the brass doors shut. Cap perched neatly atop blonde curls.

He wondered how many rapes they'd have, even in the Avenue, if elevator girls were used other than day-shifts. He regretted the phone wasn't off on Eighteen. He would have liked to enjoy the scenery longer.

Jeff acknowledged her wink as he stepped out on Three. She half-blocked the door and he had to brush past her.

He turned right, dodged abruptly to avoid collision.

Hesitated. The hurrying man's shabby topcoat gave him pause. Not the type to be rushing along the halls of the Avenue.

Still, why not? They sold eight-dollar singles as well as hundred-dollar suites.

He watched the man ignore the twin bank of elevators. Push through the gray steel door to the fire-stairs. Start down.

Jeff bet he wouldn't have chosen to walk if he'd seen the blonde running the elevator. Rush or no rush.

He shrugged. Moved automatically to 320.

Listened.

All quiet.

He knocked loudly on the heavy wood.

No response. Maybe that had been — Farnsworth? — he'd just passed. He thought not. 320 was a front room. Double the eight-dollar minimum.

He fitted a key to the spring lock. Opened the door only part way.

He remembered the time he'd checked a report of noise on Fourteen, late at night. Used his Master to walk right in. The couple on the bed hadn't been glad to see him.

"This is the Assistant Manager. Anything wrong?"

He pushed the door all the way open.

It was the middle of the afternoon but the venetian blinds were

down. The large room was dark grey with shadow.

He crossed to the telephone table set between twin beds, reached for the night-light.

He thought the room was empty.

Yellow glowed at a soft touch.

He was wrong.

He saw a man sprawled at his feet.

The face, wide pupils staring, was ashen grey. As the room had been.

Jeff started.

He knew the look of death. He had seen it many times in Korea. Too many.

He squatted on his heels. Blood was flowing over the carpet. He touched a drooping cheek.

Warm.

He reached for a pulse.

Nothing.

The phone was on the floor, near the man's head. Slack fingers were groped toward a receiver they would never lift.

Crouched over the body, Jeff flashed for the operator—leaving the receiver where it had fallen.

He saw the gash. Something had ripped the man's throat open. Bubbles of red lined the slit.

From a distance he heard Millie.

He leaned forward, raised his voice. Cut short her flurry of questions. Snapped his words.

Millie subsided. Listened obediently.

"Send the House Doctor. Ring the General Manager, Mr. Waring." And—with distaste — "Get Brole."

He thought of having her call the Police. Decided to let Waring. Waring had friends at the Precinct.

While he waited, he remembered the man in the hall. Maybe...

On a hunch he flashed again.

Millie was right there.

"Just a minute, hon, I'm trying to get Mr. Waring. The Doctor's at the hospital, you want..."

"Mill—get me the doormen. Can you ring all four entrances together?"

He said entrances but doors work two ways. He was thinking of exits.

"Sure, what about the Doctor?"

"Never mind. The doormen. Okay?"

"Okay okay."

She sounded resolved. As if his behavior had so outdistanced her questions, she had given up asking.

He heard her tell each doorman to stay on the line, adding the two service-entrances.

Jeff blessed her silently. He hadn't thought of those.

Tersely he described the man he'd seen, asked if he'd left.

Art, at the Chestnut door, remembered some guy with a beat-up topcoat like that. Left a couple of minutes since. Hadn't seen his face, had just seen the coat go by.

Jeff told him to check the street.

Millie asked if he was through with the others — the cross-connections were tying up her board.

Jeff said, "Yes," as Art came back.

"Sorry, he's gone. What's the trouble? He beat his bill?"

"Skip it, Art. Thanks."

Click.

"Waring," an impatient voice boomed.

"Jefferson, Mr. Waring. Trouble in room—320. You'd better come up, sir."

"I'm pretty busy. What is it?"

"Important. Think you'd want to come, sir."

Jeff was all to conscious there had been only one click. Millie's key was wide-open. He knew Waring wouldn't want the hall filled with gawking employees.

Waring was crisp.

"I'm on my way."

Jeff took his handkerchief and slid the receiver sidewise against its overturned base, cutting the connection.

An October breeze whispered between the closed blinds. Chilled him.

One bed was undisturbed. A pair of trousers, flung over an easy chair. An empty pint of "Early Times" lay in a pool of whiskey stain.

With his wrist, Jeff flicked on the overhead light.

Deep green carpeting made striking contrast with deeper red blood soaking a widening circle.

On the low dresser—a black pocket comb, a handkerchief reeking of bourbon, a money clip, empty. And the drained pint.

Jeff looked under each bed, the dresser. There was an orange plastic disk. And a gold-colored hairpin. The man had been registered alone . . .

Jeff turned as a shoe scraped the door frame.

Waring swept in, Brole puffing at his heels.

Waring, tall, heavily-built, fifty, had dark, penetrating eyes. Could alternate force and charm, depending whether he was igniting a department-head or welcoming a dignitary. He was devoid of the stuffiness popularly associated with hotel managers.

Leonard Brole, Executive Assistant Manager, was more the "type." He wore no carnation but it would have suited his aloof, ultra-hygenic aura.

Waring stood gazing at the body. The grey pallor, the staring eyes, left no doubt.

Brole's mouth opened.

"Jesus! This is bad! Why'd he have to go and do it here! Jesus!"

Waring spun around. Angry.

"It's bad alright. It's bad. Not because it happened *here*. Because it happened. Because a man is dead."

"Suicide?" Brole asked.

Jeff answered.

"Not unless he swallowed the knife."

"Well, it could be underneath the body."

"I looked," Jeff said.

Waring told Brole to get the man's registration card.

"He's with the automotive-parts

people," Jeff offered. "From Mishawaka."

"Don't you want Jefferson to go? You'll need me here," Brole asked.

"Get the card. Don't say anything. Nothing. Got me?"

"Right away, Boss. You know me—not a word."

Brole trundled off, nose in the air.

Jeff described how he'd found the body, what he knew, what he'd done.

Waring nodded approvingly, put his handkerchief around the telephone.

"Get me Captain Rourke, Chicago Avenue Station. And, Millie, whatever you hear—forget."

Listening, Jeff knew he'd been wrong. There *was* somebody Millie wouldn't dare call "Hon."—Waring.

Jeff smoked quietly, looking everywhere but at the body. Neil Waring talked to "Tommy" Rourke, Captain of the district.

Jeff mused that all the coffee the beat-cops drank in the Avenue Kitchen, all the Fifths Waring sent Rourke at Christmas, were about to pay off in more than double-parking privileges.

He was right. When the police arrived, three cigarettes later, they were in plain clothes. Without reporters.

He met Detective-Sergeant Joe Sawicki and Detective John Thiel. He noticed how respectfully they regarded Waring, Rourke had put out the word alright.

Jeff recited his story.

Sergeant Sawicki edged a newly-returned Brole downstairs again. Told Waring three lab-men would be along. Arranged for the "meat-wagon" at the Seneca service entrance. Told Jeff to think about the man in the hall.

Jeff said his recollection was only a tall, bushy man. In a much-worn black-and-white topcoat and in a hurry.

Sawicki snorted.

"Think harder. We'll get back to it."

Jeff pointed under the dresser.

Grunting, Sawicki strained to his knees. Stood up, pocketing hairpin and orange disk. Threw, "Good."

At first sight, Jeff had sized him as one more paunchy, florid-faced Polack, Big-City detective. If he hadn't known the right politicians he'd still be pounding pavements.

Now Jeff wondered. Questions had been to-the-point. Maybe he was smarter than he looked, much smarter.

Jeff hoped so. The faster Sawicki could solve this thing, the less grist for the newspaper mill. And grind they would. "THE HOTEL RIPPER." Jeff shuddered.

About the other detective, Thiel, Jeff had no doubts. Thiel was at least six-foot-three, with immense shoulders and a long jaw. He kept his hands in his overcoat pockets, watched Sawicki. Definitely the pavement-pounding type.

Sawicki bent over the body.

Jeff thought any butcher would have shown more emotion about a carcass of beef.

Sawicki's face cracked in a crooked grin. Exposing tobacco-stained teeth. He reached into the flannel robe that twisted around the corpse, pulling out an almost full package of cigarettes. Offered it. Waring shook his head, Thiel accepted. Jeff recoiled.

Sawicki smiled broadly. Put the pack to his mouth, fastened thick lips around a cigarette. Addressed Jeff, gesturing with the package, cigarette dangling.

"What's the matter, kid? He won't need 'em."

Jeff kept quiet.

The police surgeon arrived, ushered in by Brole who announced the entrance loudly. Brole seemed glad to be back—where his importance could be recognized.

He looked at Jeff.

"Better get downstairs, the wedding and the sales conference are breaking."

"Just a minute." Sawicki spoke to Waring.

"I'd like him to stay around awhile. Alright with you, sir?"

Jeff wondered. More questions about the man in the hall? Oh well, five hours to seven-thirty. Plenty of time to play games with the Detective-Sergeant and meet Jill.

Waring nodded.

To Brole: "You go down, will you."

It was not a question.

"You'll need me, Boss. Why don't I call Rodriguez? It's his day to work anyway."

Jeff cut in.

"It's his Wedding Anniversary, Mr. Waring, we changed shifts. He's been planning for weeks."

Jeff waited edgily for Waring's answer, Luis Rodriguez was his friend.

Waring waved Brole out.

"You go ahead. Let Rodriguez have his day. I'll call if I need you."

Brole left with poor grace. And a dark glance at Jeff.

Jeff didn't notice; there was horrible fascination in the way the Doctor had brushed aside the corpse's robe, the body limp on its left side, and was inserting a rectal thermometer. Like you'd test a roast for cooking time.

The Police Surgeon stood up. He must have the word from Rourke too, Jeff thought.

"Death by laceration of the carotid artery and jugular vein. Inflicted, probably, with about a six-inch blade. Died almost immediately. Blood still not fully coagulated. He's nearly body-temperature. Time of death about forty-five minutes ago."

It registered with Jeff how closely he'd missed the actual stabbing. He tried to bring the face of the man he'd seen to focus.

"You figure this is right, Doc..." Sawicki, still smoking the dead man's cigarette, stood at the foot of the body. "Cut starts high under

the left ear. Angles down and right.

"Looks like Farnham was standing—here." Sawicki turned around. "Now Farnham's five-ten—say, my height. So the cut'd figure if a guy Johnny's height . . ." he motioned Thiel to face him. ". . . Raised his right arm . . ." Sawicki lifted Thiel's ham of a hand. "And chopped with a long knife. So!"

Everybody winced as Sawicki brought Thiel's empty hand down on his neck. Hard.

Whatever he is, Jeff thought, he's a showman.

The Police Doctor, unimpressed, nodded.

"What about motive?" Thiel finally spoke. "Money? Fight?"

Jeff remembered the gold hairpin. The empty money clip. And what was the orange disk Sawicki had pocketed

"Let's dig a little," Sawicki said. "This phone business," he looked at the Doctor. "You figure he grabbed for it?"

"More likely fell against it."

He turned Farnham's hand over. The palm was a thick smear of drying blood.

"He must have grabbed his throat," the Doctor continued. "He couldn't have grabbed the knife, his hand's not cut. Strictly speaking, he couldn't have grabbed anything."

He worked two of the dead man's fingers back and forth loosely.

"See. This 'death-grip' business is hogwash. At a death blow, the body slacks."

Jeff flexed his own fist, assured himself he was alive. Not like the crumpled heap on the floor.

The lab-men came. Began the "going-over."

Sawicki went out to the corridor, motioning Waring and Jeff after him.

He asked space for questioning—bellboys, doormen, telephone operators, elevator girls, Farnham's convention associates, Jeff again. He wanted to see Farnham's bill, what charges he'd had, what phone calls.

Waring arranged for Sawicki to use his office, suggested coffee and sandwiches.

Thiel emerged. Following Waring.

"Come down in an hour." Sawicki called to Jeff.

Jeff looked at his watch. It was several seconds before he could understand the time. The big watch-face blurred. Violent death, even to battle-trained ex-soldiers, is never an easy experience.

Two-forty-five. Only an hour since he'd found the body? God!

He decided to go to one of the hotel bars. He guessed he was off-duty.

He thought of phoning Jill, his date for the evening, rejected it. He'd see her in—four and a half hours. He planned to get very drunk that night. Very drunk.

The wet blood on the green carpet trickled and glimmered in his mind. He reached for a cigarette.

Remembered Sawicki and the dead man's pack. Put it back.

He didn't even see the elevator girl wink.

He went to the 'Cocktail Corner', a dark nook off the lobby.

Hazily returned the greeting of a hotel regular, slumped over the bar, who sold oil-filters. The only filter Jeff had seen him use was bourbon-on-the-rocks.

Jeff sat at the far end, ordered rye manhattan.

An unnerving realization began to rattle his mind.

Suppose his man *was* the murderer. Suppose he was the only one who saw him. Unless the lab-men found fingerprints he'd be the only link. A clay pigeon. "RIPPER CASE RESTS ON EYE-WITNESS."

Jeff braced, ordered another manhattan—a double. Tried to think of Jill. That wasn't too hard, she was extremely pleasant thought-material.

At three-forty, Jeff pushed away from the bar—cold sober.

Mounted the stairs to Waring's mezzanine office. As he climbed, sinking into thick carpet, a hazy face floated just out of his mind's eye.

He couldn't quite discern it. Almost—but not quite. In a return of fear, he wasn't sure he wanted to.

Sawicki and Thiel were deep in conversation with Waring. At least, Sawicki was. Jeff noticed the detectives had followed Farnham's cigarettes with fat cigars. Waring's, no doubt. Waring was an expert host. A professional.

Sawicki faced the General Manager across a desk littered with coffee cups. Thiel sat in one of the leather chairs that lined the mahogany walls.

Sawicki briefed Jeff on the findings of the hour since they'd left the murder room.

It was a lot for an hour.

The dresser top, door knob, had been wiped clean. Which meant prints found were the corpse's, the maid's, past occupants'. They were still checking.

The hairpin seemed explained. Farnham had gone out with three friends from the convention, the night before. To "The Follies"—a dive nightclub on North Clark Street. Farnham had already had a few before leaving the hotel—the empty pint. Wanted a woman.

They had gone through the usual routine with the B-girls at "The Follies." Iced tea at two dollars a crack. In return, the girls act tipsy and put their hand on your knee.

His friends stayed but Farnham got impatient, left to try other joints. They hadn't wanted him to go alone but he'd insisted. Said he'd have a better chance with a dolly. Said he wasn't carrying much money, it was in his room. His friends thought he had a couple thousand there.

Sawicki had checked Mishawaka.

Learned Farnham had been a widower, wife dead two years.

Jeff was uneasy. Why was Sawicki bothering to tell him all this?

"So here's what I think, kid. For what it's worth.

"I think Farnham found himself a girl alright, made himself a deal, brought her to the Hotel."

Sawicki glanced apologetically at Waring.

"Brought her to the Hotel and spent the night. He must have had the money hidden, but maybe he bragged about it. Maybe to get her —from that hairpin I'll call her Blondie—back the next night.

"The floor-maid saw a woman leave at nine this morning. Didn't see her face. Tried to make-up the room but Farnham, in bed, told her forget it.

"When Blondie left, I figure she picked up her boyfriend, maybe her pimp. Tipped him to the good deal. This afternoon he came over.

"Maybe he thought Farnham would be at the convention. He was supposed to be."

Jeff listened. The Detective-Sergeant *was* smarter than he looked.

"Either Blondie palmed Farnham's key or the boyfriend used a picklock. That door wouldn't be hard to gimmick." Again he looked apologetically at Waring.

"Farnham, drunk and exhausted —he was middle-aged and Blondie must have been a good roll from the way the bed was mussed—was asleep. The boyfriend started looking for the money. Figured to tap Farnham on the head if he woke up.

"Farnham *did* wake up. And was tough to handle. Or Blondie's boyfriend has a record, couldn't afford to be caught. Or he just panicked. Anyway he pulled a shiv and that was that. No more living evidence."

Except me, Jeff thought sickly.

"He must have found the money. No trace of it and Farnham deposited none in the hotel safe. His friends are sure he had a couple thousand. Luckily for Boyfriend—or for you—he beat it fast. You might have come in on him. That fallen phone was one thing he missed."

Jeff objected.

"Why do you think a man was involved at all? The man I saw could have come from any of fifty rooms. You know a woman was there earlier. Why couldn't she have come back?"

Jeff didn't want to be sole proof, it was waving a red flag to the murderer. Not that he was a coward. But he knew it could have the same result bars had for an officer in combat. Snipers shot them first.

Sawicki shook his head.

"The killer was a man. The angle and force of the blow. Farnham was big and the murderer struck down, he must have been bigger. The knife ripped hell out of Farnham, that takes power. He must have been stronger.

"By time of death, the murderer

was the guy you passed. He was big, hurrying, used the stairs. He wasn't the type to be a guest. Farnham died just before you got there. Coincidence goes so far, you know. You can identify him, can't you?"

"What about that orange disk?"

Jeff was trying to change the subject. Once he affirmed he could identify the murderer—he wasn't even sure he could—and the newspapers got it . . . The vision of the tall knife killer on his trail was a grim spectre.

"I think I've got that figured," Sawicki answered, chewing happily on the cigar.

"It looks like a drink-check B-girls use. The bartender gives them one each time they get a sucker for a drink. They cash in later. They use stirrers, or disks—like this."

Sawicki held up the orange plastic circle.

Jeff nodded. It fit. Too well.

"Can you trace it?"

"We're going to try."

Sawicki handed the disk to Thiel.

Jeff relaxed. For a second, the "we" had grated. He thought Sawicki had included *him*.

"Like you to take a ride to Central Precinct. Check the Mug File."

He didn't wait for Jeff's answer.

Jeff followed the two detectives downstairs, told himself his nervousness was crazy. What risk to picking a man's picture at a Police Station?

He checked his watch again, three-ten. Still four hours to meet his date.

He enjoyed the squad-car ride. Thiel drove, Sawicki next to him, Jeff in back. The black, unmarked Ford sped South on Michigan Boulevard, Mercury engine purring.

They screeched into the Police Garage, three miles away, four minutes later. Thiel was as saving of time as of words.

They walked across Eleventh Street. The weathered building housing Chicago's Police Headquarters hulked against a smoke-laden sky. Wind whipped out of the West, from the industrial area beyond the Loop.

Inside, Jeff's strongest impression was that everybody kept their hats on. Even detectives hunched at desks, working over reports, had hats tilted on the backs of their heads.

To Jeff's relief, he was unable to identify any of several hundred pictures.

Thiel, in a rare rush of words, begged him to recall a scar, a mole, something to pin it down.

Jeff stuck to his description. A tall, bushy, dark-complected man. Wearing a shabby salt and pepper topcoat. Whom he *might* recognize if he saw again.

Sawicki lit another Waring cigar, looked thoughtfully at Jeff. Saucer eyes wide and innocent.

"Like you to cruise with us a little. North Clark. Try the place Farnham and his friends started,

places near it. We get Blondie we got a line on her boyfriend."

"Look, Sergeant, I've got a date in three hours. Why do you need *me*?"

"Sure, I figured a young, good-looking kid to have a date Saturday night. This won't take long. An hour, two. Only a dozen joints on that strip.

"Maybe you'll spot him. And if we find Blondie we'll need a lever, you're 'It.' Convince her we've got a positive make on Boyfriend, she'll split wide-open."

Jeff was not happy. They were going fishing with him for bait. Live bait.

The seating was the same. Jeff, looking at the red necks of Sawicki and Thiel, wondered why they bothered to use an unmarked car. They couldn't have looked more "police" if they'd been uniformed.

Thiel steered West on Eleventh Street, North on LaSalle. Jounced over the treads of one of the dozen bridges that span the Chicago River.

They were back in the jumbled Near-North Side. A crazy cluster. East—Lake Michigan, parks, beaches, swank apartment-towers, exclusive shops, the Avenue and its multitude of sister hotels. North—a gradual fade to a tediously middle-class residential section. West—the River again, bending many times in its course through Chicago.

In this area—perhaps two and a half miles on a side—concentrates much of the dynamic that pulses the City. The silk stocking set, the queer, the pseudo-artist, the real one. The panderer, pimp and prostitute. The student, the ad-man, the builder.

Here are the Furniture Market, Montgomery Ward's giant mail-order center, Rush Street—an unbroken mile of nightclubs and restaurants that draw out-of-towners like sheep to slaughter.

Here, too, is North Clark Street—the girl shows, the narcotics. Anything. Everything.

And the plush hotels of the "Gold Coast" cling to the Lake—three quarters of a mile away.

They were a block West of North Clark. Sawicki pointed. Thiel turned the car sharply to the curb. The detectives were out instantly.

Jeff was puzzled. They had stopped near the Moody Bible Institute. Sawicki couldn't want to check for Blondie *here!*

Jeff looked through the double-thick rear window. Sawicki and Thiel had slowed. Were ambling. Converging on a thirtyish man in an Army field-jacket carrying a large shopping bag.

The detectives pulled abreast, one each side. Thiel muttered something. Jeff could see his badge glint as he flashed it.

The man handed the sack to Sawicki.

The Detective-Sergeant took the string grips in each hand. Leaned his neck over. Peered in.

Shook his head at Thiel, returned the bag and the detectives sauntered back.

Jeff was curious. "What was that all about? Looking for contraband Bibles?"

Sawicki was placid, and succinct. "Car-strippers. Big rash around here. Use shopping bags."

Jeff stifled the urge to mention his date again.

He supposed he should be grateful there were men like these to do Society's dirty work. He wondered how often their wives had watched dinners grow cold, their men tramping bleak streets in search of the parasites that gnaw at Chicago's pork barrel.

He supposed he should be grateful but right then he wasn't. Right then he was anxious to be away, meet Jill. Resentful—and not a little afraid—at being made a brass ring.

Grab the Brass Ring, Killer, win a free ride. Miss it, you got to get off. And the merry-go-round is Life itself.

Thiel wheeled onto North Clark Street.

Even at quarter to five, in full daylight, the street was gaudy with neon glow. Signs flashed on both sides.

GIRLS—25 ACTS—GIRLS

707 CLUB

Winos shuffled. Too early for tourists. The signs flashed.

NITE-LIFE. THE FOLLIES

Thiel pulled around the corner, they got out.

The first story had a new front. When you looked up—over the garish camouflage of banners and lights—you saw the seedy, ramshackle floors above.

Jeff went first.

A few patrons slouched at wooden tables. Two worn women lounged at the bar, backs to it, legs crossed.

Neither was blonde.

They stared with interest, started to get up.

Spotted Sawicki and Thiel, scowled. Turned around to their beers.

The bartender remembered Farnham—under pressure. Said he'd left after twenty minutes and never come back. The others had stayed to get roaring drunk, had been good spenders.

No, he didn't know where Farnham had gone.

Sawicki showed him the orange disk.

"You know we don't solicit drinks here! It's illegal!"

Sawicki walked behind the bar.

Held up a cigar box filled with fancy stirrers.

Jeff noticed they were different from the ones being served.

Sawicki shook his head despairingly, the bartender watched a fly.

They left.

Five more places were no better.

All the bartenders feigned indignation, in all the bars Sawicki or Thiel came up with tell-tale drink checks.

None were orange disks.

The sixth had black-painted windows, adorned with nude pictures.

Gilt blazed:

THE GOLDEN GARTER

Inside, the same story. Description of Farnham brought a blank; the orange disk—wounded offense. Sawicki didn't bother to check the bar.

On the sidewalk, Sawicki stopped. Jeff turned on him.

"It's six o'clock, I've got to get my girl in an hour and a quarter, that was the same as all the others, can't I . . ."

"The same? No. Wait."

Sawicki disappeared through the swinging doors.

Jeff and Thiel waited. Looked at the pictures.

It was five minutes before Sawick came out. Thiel was getting edgy. Jeff had been edgy all along.

Sawicki displayed another of his broad, tobacco-stained grins. The same grin he'd had when he found the cigarettes on the dead man.

He waved a slip of paper.

"We've got Blondie."

"What!"

"How?"

Sawicki opened his hand. There were *two* orange disks.

"Spotted the bartender ducking this as we came in, word gets along The Street fast. Blondie picked-up Farnham here. They left together, late last night."

"How'd you get him to admit he knew Blondie?"

Sawicki started walking.

"Convinced him he was about to lose his liquor license."

A block further on, Sawicki consulted the paper he held. Nodded.

"Here."

They climbed two flights of creaky stairs. Sawicki didn't knock. Just pushed the door hard and stepped back. It flew open with a snap.

Thiel pulled Jeff out of line with the door.

They saw a faded blonde. Brittle features, maleovent look. In transparent brassiere. Tight black panties. Garter-belt cutting red ridges down her meaty thighs.

Either she recognized Sawicki and Thiel or the bartender had announced them.

"Whaddya mean bustin' inta a lady's room! Don' Cops give a girl time ta dress?"

She spat the words, making no attempt to cover herself.

Sawicki threw her a gauzy robe from the foot of the brass bed.

"Here, Goldielocks. Put this on and you're dressed for work. And talk when *I* say so. Not until."

She snatched the kimono. Eyes burning with hate.

Sawicki started questioning. He was not gentle.

She admitted leaving 'The Golden Garter' with Farnham. She denied going to the Avenue. Claimed they had gone to a few bars and she finally ditched him.

Sawicki pressured her to *name* them.

Sitting on the bed, she steadily insisted she had been too drunk. She looked, to Jeff, badly in need of a drink right then.

Sawicki leaned over. Rested beefy hands on the mattress. With short ugly words he told her that she had slept with Farnham. That she had been identified by a maid at nine o'clock that morning. That she had known Farnham had money. That she had been unable to find it. That she had set him up for the kill. That her pimp had knifed him at one-forty. That they had taken the money. That there was positive identification. Here, he indicated Jeff.

Jeff winced.

Sawicki added, "Half a dozen others too."

Blondie—her name they discovered was Jean Krezna—played with her stringy blonde hair, looked bored. Reeled answers in dull, flat tones.

They must be mistaken. Farnham—she'd known him as Les—had been out of money. That's why she'd dropped him. The maid was crazy, she'd never been in the Avenue in her life. She didn't have a pimp. She was sorry somebody had knifed the old guy but that's life. Nasty break.

Sawicki leaned against the wall mockingly.

"You know, of course, there was *five* grand taken from Farnham's room?"

She struggled to keep the shock from her eyes. She almost succeeded.

Sawicki moved for the door.

"He gave you a crooked cut, Jean. Wise up. You got two hours to spill. Or I'll tell the newspapers you did anyway. Your boyfriend will be looking for *you* with his knife."

Sawicki flipped the duplicate disk at her.

"Souvenir."

As they climbed down, Jeff's blood ran cold. If Sawicki's bluff didn't work, if Blonde trusted her accomplice . . . She'd need someone to make him trust *her*.

Now she knew Jeff. She could convince Boyfriend Jeff was the one to worry about. Blondie was probably on the phone already.

Jeff felt like a minnow on a hook.

Sawicki left Thiel on watch, said he'd send a relief from the Station.

Jeff walked along North Clark with Sawicki. Wondering if the killer's eyes were on him. Keeping clear of doorways. Peering through windows. Looking over his shoulder.

They reached Chicago Avenue. Precinct Headquarters, Captain Rourke's Precinct, was half a block.

Six-thirty, forty-five minutes to pick up Jill.

Sawicki stopped, faced Jeff. Another tobacco grin.

"Nervous, kid?"

"Yes."

"Come with me a minute. Five minutes. You got five minutes. Have a bowl of chili, cup of coffee."

Jeff considered. It had been six hours since he'd eaten, a sandwich from the wedding luncheon — grabbed in the Service Kitchen. He didn't want to get drunk on an empty stomach. Besides, he might as well prolong his police protection.

They went into a chili-parlor on the corner. The ten-stool counter shook every time a streetcar rumbled. The greasy occupants of the other eight stools deadened Jeff's appetite. But the place was warm, the coffee hot.

Sawicki spooned large, thick gulps of chili with loud smacks. Sucked the last of it, passed a paper napkin across his smeared mouth, succeeded only in entrenching the smudges. Spoke for the first time since they'd sat down.

"Let me give it to you straight."

"Shoot." Jeff's heart skipped at his own word.

"I called City News Bureau and the Wire Services while you checked the Mug File. The evening papers will say we have witnesses, not named, who saw the killer. And positive fingerprints. That we are withholding identity until the arrest, expected momentarily. The morning editions will have a squib about a blonde, nameless, who turned State's evidence.

"Whenever you've got two people in a crime, drive a wedge between 'em. Pretty soon Blondie may shake enough to spill, or to run to Boyfriend. Or Boyfriend will panic and try to leave town, I've got men on all terminals.

"And here's our surest bet. We find who Blondie hung with along The Street. Match 'em with your description. Put the likelies through a lineup. You finger him; it's all wrapped up."

He looked at Jeff steadily.

"Meantime you've got *nothing* to sweat. One: he'll be busy worrying about Blondie and dodging us. Two: *he doesn't know who you are.* Neither does Blondie."

Sawicki made sense. This was a routine case, Sawicki had handled hundreds. He should have known the Detective-Sergeant would rig the news stories, couldn't have his star witness a target.

Sawicki slapped him on the back.

"Go on to your date, kid. I'll let you know what happens—soon."

Sawicki smiled confidently, licking last remnants of chili.

At seven-ten Jeff crossed the streetcar tracks of Chicago Avenue on his way to pick up his date. Three blocks and five minutes to go.

He became uneasy. He thought he glimpsed something out of the side of his eye. Something, or *somebody*. Every time he turned, the street was clear. Only the usual Boulevard passer-by. Couples on

dates, businessmen, secretaries, a "debu-tramp" with her poodle.

Still, he was uneasy. There was a shadow. A presence. He knew somebody was there, somebody was watching him. He was as jumpy as before. He tried to think of Sawicki's reassurances. It didn't work. Nothing worked. He *knew* somebody was there.

As he reached Superior Street—only two blocks from Jill—he stopped at the corner, pretended to be setting his watch.

Finally, an East-bound car turned left onto Michigan. Its side-windows, closed against the chill October night, gave him the glimpse behind he'd waited for.

The follower realized too late, delayed too long. Jeff saw him.

Thiel!

His blood ran colder. Sawicki hadn't been as confident of his safety as he'd made it sound.

Jeff turned up Erie, one more blocks.

Why hadn't Sawicki told him he was being guarded? Probably hadn't wanted to worry him. It didn't mean anything.

Sawicki was just playing it safe. It was natural for him to play it safe. It didn't mean anything.

He rode the battered elevator to the fourth floor, the squeaking elevator announced itself. Jill had her door wide-open.

Jeff helped her into the enormous tan polo coat she held and they stepped into the still-open elevator.

They walked, talking, gradually losing themselves in that special rapport they always found together. If Jill noticed his strain, his extra reserve, she made no comment.

Their destination was Dearborn Street—the 'Way-Out'. A type place new to Chicago, a transplant from San Francisco. Featuring sawdust on the floor and paintings on the walls. Bock beer and brockwurst on buns.

They walked down the stairs to the entrance. No neon here. Just a dim bulb and a long mural that Jeff couldn't recognize as anything. Done on bare brick by some local "Talent."

Jeff wondered if Thiel would follow them inside. And realized—with a start—that North Clark Street, Blondie . . . and Boyfriend, were one short block away.

The boxy room was nearly pitch-dark. A single narrow beam spotted the small stage. Jeff hoped Thiel was thirsty. Would decide to keep *close* vigil. The waitress, in toreador pants, guided them with a tiny flashlight. Anybody could be sitting in this tightly-packed gloom, Jeff thought. *Anybody*. And he'd never know it.

There were no tables. Just rows of canvas chairs, with wooden rests for drinks, ringing the stage in semi-circle. They ordered a pitcher of beer. Jeff looked around, tried to pierce the wall of black. No good. He couldn't see more than a few feet to either side.

The chairs were close together, Jill's thigh pressed his in the darkness. The place sounded full. The beer was good, Jeff drank deeply. He needed it.

Seven-forty-five heavy applause. Sam Williams was on-stage. His sole prop a straight-back chair. He rested his leg on the seat, his elbow on that. Tuned the guitar slung around his neck on a leather thong. A giant of a man. Black corduroy shirt, sleeves rolled-back, exposed powerful, sinewy wrists. The shirt was open across his ebony chest. A religious medal flashed in the light from the single spot.

Jeff had another glass of beer.

Sam Williams finished tuning. Started to play—

"John Henry he could ham—
MUH..."

Rich bass voice boomed on. Jeff sat up. For once, Jill had been right. She smiled at him.

"...John Henry was a steel-drivin' man LORD! LORD!
John Henry was a steel-drivin' MAN!"

Calypso, work song, Elizabethan ballad, sea chanty, spiritual. He played song after song.

Jeff drank beer after beer. Loved it. Relaxed, warmed. His fears floated away on puffs of foam and music.

It was nine-thirty before the fired crowd let Sam Williams go.

Jeff was feeling good by nine-thirty. Very, very good. Jill wanted to stay for the second show—at ten. That was fine with Jeff. Anything was fine with Jeff. Everything was fine with Jeff.

The lights came on, dimly. Angled into the corners. Reflected the rough red of the inside walls. Jeff blinked.

Red brick . . . red blood . . . black and white coat . . . green carpet . . . orange disk . . . gold hairpin . . . brass ring . . . dream . . . crazy dream . . . all happened to somebody else . . .

More songs, more beer. Puffs and puffs of music and foam.

This time Sam Williams saved "John Henry" for the encore. He retuned his guitar. Started to play—

"John Henry he could ham—
MUH..."

Two figures were coming down the narrow aisle between the rows of chairs. A tall man and a blonde.

The song was building in crescendo. Sam Williams played louder and louder. Harder and harder.

"LORD HE WAS STRIKIN' FIRE! "

His fingers almost drew sparks from the guitar. Faster and faster. So fast they couldn't be seen.

"Throwin' forty poun's from the hips on down..."

The two figures were still coming. Coming at Jeff. The faces—he couldn't make out the faces. Thiel? No. The walk's wrong. He shook his head. Struggled to clear it. Put a hand over Jill's. Started to push himself up. This was it. Protect Jill. Got to protect Jill.

"...He was a steel-drivin' man
LORD! LORD!
He was a steel-drivin'
MAN! ..."

Where's the knife? The man ought to have a big knife.

"And he died with his ham-muh in his han' LORD! LORD!

"And he died with his ham-mer—in his—hand!"

Sam Williams dropped his head to his chest. His hand to his side. The lights came up. The couple walked past.

Jill tugged at his sleeve, "Time to go."

Outside, the air was crisp. Jeff's fuzziness dropped away.

Was Thiel still with them? Jeff didn't look. Didn't care. He was through jumping at ghosts. He didn't think he'd be able to spot Thiel at night anyway, the detective was pretty good.

They arrived at Jill's.

The elevator was at the fourth floor a full five minutes before they got out. Jill used her key.

Several hours later Jeff rode down alone in the elevator.

Dabbing at his mouth with his handkerchief, it came away pink, he hailed a cab.

Jeff leaned back. Sat in one corner of the cab, feet up, lit a cigarette. They whirred North on Michigan, past the Avenue. The steady tick-tick-tick of the meter lulled him. He sang to himself—"And he died with his hammer in his hand, Lord Lord, he died with his hammer—"

They were on the Outer Drive. The Lake shimmered in starlight, there was a full moon. They cloverleafed off the Drive at North Avenue, headed for State Parkway. Jeff tried to see if the black squad-car was following.

He couldn't be sure. Maybe Thiel had gone to bed. Nothing was going to happen. The killer didn't even known his name.

The taxi stopped at Jeff's building, he flipped some change, slammed the cab-door to be sure it was shut. Regretted it. It was after midnight, sound echoed in the quiet street.

No sign of Thiel. No sign of anybody. Jeff went inside.

"Hello."

Jeff jumped. This was no ghost.

It was his German landlady, Mrs. Rilke. The television buzzed through the open door to her parlor.

"I see you had some excitement at your hotel today, yes? A man was *murdered*."

She shoved a paper at him with wrinkled hands. Her old eyes sparkled. Blood-lust is not restricted to the young.

Jeff nodded, scanned the paper.

She gave him a sly smile as he went up to his third-floor rooms.

Jeff puzzled. She looked as though they shared a secret.

No matter. Let her cluck over the paper's gory details. Sawicki

had been true to his word, the account mentioned *several* witnesses. None by name.

Jeff reached his door. Had he left the lights on? No matter. He swung the door shut behind him. He wanted the twelve-thirty newscast. He twisted the radio dial—

"Freeze!"

The voice crashed amid harsh static. Jeff's blood stopped. Started again. Laced with ice.

"Turn. Slow."

Raw terror overwhelmed him. His hands were talons. Gripping air. The untuned radio crackled. He pivoted. Slowly. Slowly.

The tall bushy man. The salt and pepper topcoat. The killer come to try for the brass ring!

A hand-gun pointed at his stomach. He fought for control. Think! Act! He'd been in tougher spots in Korea . . . He'd . . . The terror wouldn't go away. The blood wouldn't melt. The phantom was real.

"You were easy, just called the hotel. Jeanie and I figured you worked there. You looked the front-of-the-house type. Nice clean fingernails, Jeanie said. Nice soft hands."

Jeff was channelling his fear, using it. Take this man. He hoped he'd talk on. And on. There must be a way . . .

"Some jerk named Brole told me all about you. I said I was from the Tribune. He said you found the body but called him first thing. Gave me his name twice to make sure I spelled it right. A jerk."

Jeff memorized the face. The face that had eluded him so many hours. A rugged, unkept face. A hard, cruel face. Not unhandsome. And not over thirty-five. With such a face this man would not be faded Blondie's "boyfriend." This man would be Blondie's pimp. The face would never elude him again, he would remember it forvever.

"The old gal downstairs showed me in. The way she looked, I thought she was going to call the cops. But when I pulled my badge and said I was 'Undercover' she got real, real nice. Brought me up here so I could question you 'secretly.' She wanted to know all about the murder. I thought she was going to ask for color photographs."

An unlit cigarette dangled from his tight mouth. He held up the badge with his left hand.

"Looks good, hah?"

Jeff stalled. Time. He had to buy time.

"Where'd you get it?"

The killer put the badge in his pocket. Snapped the unlit cigarette in half.

"Later. We're leaving. Out!"

He followed Jeff down. Not too closely.

"One word, one quick movement —the old lady gets it too. Keep walking."

The killer stayed too far behind

for Jeff to use his Army judo. He prayed for Thiel to be outside.

"A point, punk. If anybody stops us, if any cops try for me—you're going for the ride. Right along with me."

No, Jeff thought bitterly. You've got it wrong. If we get stopped it's not a ride. If we get stopped we got to get off.

The hall was quiet, the parlor door closed. The landlady must have gone to bed. Jeff cursed. She's already had her kicks for the day. Jill, she keeps out. Murderers, she lets in.

They reached the street, the *empty* street. The killer stopped Jeff around the corner. At a green '49 Dodge.

"Get in. Drive."

Jeff's mind thundered. Out of his fear he groped for ideas. Any ideas.

"I can't drive. Never learned how. I never had a car."

The killer, at arm's length, reached in Jeff's inside suit pocket. Took out the wallet.

Jeff steeled himself to leap. The instant the killer's eyes shifted.

No good. The killer was too careful.

He brought the wallet up with his free hand. Moved it to the edge of his vision. Kept his eyes on Jeff.

"Driver's license! Punk. In. Drive."

The killer sat in front, propped against the right door, twisted in the seat. Facing Jeff, the pistol steady.

Jeff's eyes, as he drove, went to the rear-view mirror so often he was afraid the killer would notice. Thiel! Where the hell was Thiel?

The were on the Outer Drive. Going South. They passed the turn for the Avenue. Jeff winged a silent oath at Brole.

The tall outline of Seldon Memorial slid by. Silhouetted in the beam of the Palmolive Beacon. Jill will breakfast alone *this* morning, he thought.

They were coming to the grade leading up, over the river.

"Turn."

The killer ordered him right, then left, then left again.

They went down a ramp. They were underneath the Boulevard. Jeff wondered if he'd seen the sky for the last time.

They passed the rumble of giant news-presses. There'll be plenty to print, Jeff thought. Soon. His hands were clammy on the wheel, fingers tried to dig into the hard plastic. The green street-lights cast an eerie glow. The streets of the Lower Level were deserted.

They crossed the Chicago River on the bottom tier of the Michigan Bridge.

"Stop. Out."

They left the car between two of the steel pilings that supported the Boulevard overhead. Walked along the river, scrambling over the gravel and iron of railroad tracks.

The river emptied into the lake a thousand yards ahead. They were

moving beside it. Straight for the lake.

Jeff's mind raced wildly. Jump into the river? Swim for it?

No. Thirty feet away. He'd be cut down.

The river mirrored the moon and star light. They walked in dark, just out of its brightness. Move there, he'd be a perfect target.

If he got that far.

Turn? Smash the gun away? The killer was tall but so was he. He thought he could take him. He *had* to take him.

The killer stayed too far back. Jeff could hear him crunch the gravel. At least five feet behind him. If he whirled, the killer would shoot in the stomach. That was the most painful way.

A bell-buoy clanged mournfully. Tolling his requiem.

They were passing the locks, the lake was close.

"Look, what's killing me going to get you? The Police have plenty of witnesses. Sure, I saw you. But so did six others. The maid, guests, the doorman. You went out Chestnut Street. Leave me here. Leave town."

"Come off it punk. Maybe they got plenty, maybe they don't. Maybe they just got you. I can afford to play it that way, I can only burn once. Killing you won't cost me a thing."

"My landlady can identify you."

"As what? As a man who came to see you? So? Nobody saw us leave together. Nobody can prove I was anywhere near here. And she can't tie me to the knife job either. Everything I told her was in the papers. Move!"

They walked in silence. Only the bell-buoy. Clanging. Clanging. The river lapping the last lock.

The lake a hundred yards ahead —dead-end. In more ways than one.

Seventy-five yards. They kept walking.

Fifty. A horn sounded, drifted down from the Boulevard. A half mile behind the killer, an eternity behind Jeff.

Thirty yards. Jeff hoped the killer would shoot in the back of his head. Easier. He wouldn't have to watch him raise the gun. Squeeze.

Twenty. The bell-buoy clanged. Jeff was greedy for sounds. For sights. His last.

Five yards. The shot came.

From the river!

The killer grunted. Crouched. Hissed at Jeff to stand still.

And made his mistake.

In his crouch he leaned forward. He got within three feet of Jeff.

Jeff spun left, arms stretched out, palms together, thumbs at ninety degree angles hardening the sides of his pressed hands. He felt bone crack. His own or the killer's, he didn't know.

The killer, off-balance, fired. Inches away.

The bullet crunched into Jeff's right shoulder. He brought his left hand back.

Chopped the killer's wrist.

The gun crashed to the gravel.

Jeff's right arm hung limp.

He swung his left. Again and again. Like a bludgeon. Battering the neck. His whole world was that neck. Again. Again.

The man was on his knees. Clawing for the gun.

Jeff smashed him into the gravel. Battering. His left hand a scythe.

The man, writhing, whipped out a knife. A six-inch blade slammed open. Flashed in the moonlight.

Jeff stepped on the hand. Fingers snapped.

The man, just a man now, whimpered.

Footsteps pounded from the river.

Jeff sank to the ground, blind with pain. His left hand, holding his shoulder, was warm with blood. It dripped on the rough gravel. Mixed with that seeping from the crumpled heap.

Sawicki arrived. Gasping words in brief bursts.

"Thiel called from squad-car. Five patrols converged on the bridge. Couldn't close in. Figured he'd wait till lake. Went around. Rowboat. Hugged overhang river bank. Climbed through locks."

Sawicki grinned. A tobacco grin.

"Damn hard on a man my age. Jesus! Guess I missed. Figured I would. Shooting into dark. Had to give you a chance. Thanks, kid."

"*You* are thanking *me?*"

Sawicki was bent over the pulpy mass that was no longer a killer.

"Sonuvvabitch!"

"What?"

"No cigarettes.

A subscription to MANHUNT insures you of 128 pages of exciting and baffling mystery reading 6 times a year. See page 14.

There were two cars—the Jerry Tymes local fan club. A regular cheering section. The car doors opened and three boys got out. Two of the boys pulled short chains from their pockets. The other slid brass knucks over his fist.

SOME PLAY WITH MATCHES

BY
DICK ELLIS

I DON'T LIKE to be threatened anymore than you would. Sure, threats are an occupational hazard with newspaper columnists — but that doesn't make it easier to take. Especially when the calls came on my home phone, which is unlisted. How they got hold of the number I didn't know. Until later.

My wife answered the first call. She said "Hello," and then she didn't say another word. She didn't have a chance.

I was sitting clear across the livingroom, but I could hear the screech coming from the phone re-

ceiver. I could even make out some of the words. "Filthy bastard" was about the mildest. I dropped the evening paper and jumped across to take the phone out of Joan's trembling hand.

"Who is this?" I yelled into the phone. But the line was dead.

I hung up, turned to speak to Joan. Before I could say anything it rang again. I grabbed it. "Yes?"

"Listen you dirty sonuvabitch, you print another stinking word about Jerry Tymes and, goddam you—"

It poured out like waste out of a sewer-pipe. With a shock I realized it was a girl's voice screaming in my ear. A young girl. Probably no older than my own kid.

"—You got that you dirty filthy—"

I broke the connection. Joan and I stood there looking at each other. She tried to smile, but didn't quite make it.

"What is it they—they want?"

I managed to laugh. "Evidently somebody didn't like my column in today's paper."

Joan shook her head. "I had to marry a news-hound."

The phone rang.

I'll admit it. I backed away as if the thing had suddenly turned into a coiled rattlesnake. Joan put her hands over her ears and ran out of the room. It was the first time anything like that had happened, in all the years we'd been married.

I kept my work and my private life completely separate. Or I had up till then.

And the phone kept ringing, ringing.

But I was busy writing in my mind the column for tomorrow's paper. Jerry Tymes, ah? Well . . . The lead paragraph shaped itself, punctuated by the shrill clamor of the phone.

Rock-and-roll singer Jerry Tymes, the boy with the flowing locks and the hog-caller's voice, current idol of the sweat-shirt and dungaree set, is no buddy of mine. One of the wonders of this wonderful age is the weird devotion this young squirt with the ants in his pants seems to inspire . . .

"How could you, Daddy?" Pat almost screamed at me, the next evening. "How *could* you write such things about *Jerry?*"

Pat sat at the dinner table, her mouth a trembling pink "O." She was almost sixteen. Right then, she didn't look it.

"It was no trouble," I said, keeping it light.

"Eat your dinner," Joan said severely.

"Don't you understand?" Pat yelped. "I'm vice-president of Jerry's *fan* club here—"

"You mean you were," I broke in.

She stared at me.

"I don't want to catch you anywhere near that stupid fan club—not from now on."

Pat got up and marched out, wearing that martyred expression

she had when she didn't get her own way.

Joan smiled uncertainly. "You did put her in a heck of a spot with her friends. They all belong to the fan club—and you know how seriously kids take those things."

"Like making phone calls," I said.

"Oh, that couldn't be any of Pat's—"

The phone rang.

We both jumped, then I laughed. "I had the number changed this morning, remember? It's probably the boss."

I went in the livingroom, picked up the phone.

"—We told you yesterday to lay off but you have to be a wise sonuvabitch, well you're asking for it—"

It wasn't the boss.

I tore the phone loose from its socket and threw it on the floor. Only four people knew that new number. Joan and myself, my city editor, and— Slowly, unwillingly, my eyes turned to the closed door of Pat's room.

The first time I'd mentioned Jerry Tymes in my column—the bit that drew the first phone calls—I'd just made a small joke in passing. The second column was a little stronger. The third day I really turned on the heat.

Hell, Tymes was nothing to me. Just another of the bunch of silly-looking kids who came out of nowhere with nothing but a backwoods accent and a guitar, and parlayed them into a couple hundred grand a year on television and records. Which was great.

But the effect they had on kids, with their off-color songs and their suggestive manner—that wasn't so great. That's the line I took in my column.

Sounds reasonable enough, doesn't it? Just another plea for parents to take a little interest in what their children are up to. Nothing to make anybody very mad.

But when I got home that third afternoon, I had visitors.

In broad daylight, with traffic rushing by on the busy street in front of the house, with neighbors working in their yards all up and down the block.

I put my car in the garage and crossed the lawn toward the house. I saw the two cars parked at the curb. A half-dozen kids in each car —friends of Pat's, I thought idly.

Three boys got out and came toward me. They wore brightly colored jackets and blue-jeans. I stopped.

"—Give it to him!" a voice yelled from one of the cars.

The boys came on, licking their lips nervously, their eyes darting from side to side. None of the three was over eighteen years old.

"—Let him have it!"

I glanced at the cars. Young eager faces crowded the open windows. All girls. A regular cheering sec-

tion. Two of the boys pulled short chains from their pockets. The other slid a set of steel knucks over his fist.

I didn't believe it. It was too incredible. They closed in. "Don't be silly," I said.

"—Come on, come on!" the cheering section screamed.

The neighbors along the street were turning now, looking curiously toward my place. I stood there, slowly shifting my weight to my left foot. "Don't be silly," I repeated.

"You been asking for it, man." The biggest boy gave me a sickly grin. "We're going to bust you up, man."

I still couldn't believe they were serious. Then the big kid said, "Now."

They came in swinging. I was thirty-eight, under-sized in height and over-sized around the belly. I guess they thought they had an easy touch. Maybe I should have told them I spent ten years in the Marine Corps.

I covered up, riding out the first blows. Dimly I could hear the cheering section living it up. "—Guess you'll write about *Jerry* again, wise guy!"

The boy with the knucks made a pass at me. I took it on my arm, and saw an opening. I rocked back, came up with my right foot—where the kick would do the most good. He was through. One down and two to go.

A chain got past my guard, laid open the side of my face. I shoved one boy away and let the other have an elbow in the teeth, followed by a chop to the adam's apple. Two down.

The third boy started backing off. He swung his chain wildly, the look on his face almost comical. This wasn't the way it happened in the movies. He didn't know what to do.

I helped him out. The chain wrapped around my fist and I jerked it, bringing him in. I planted a straight jab in his open mouth. He would need a couple new teeth.

That was it. Panting for breath, I braced my wobbly legs apart and tried to wipe away the blood pouring down my cheek. I felt stupidly elated. The pain would come later.

People were running toward me from nearby houses. I noticed the two cars had cut out. Some cheering section. I gave the boy with the broken teeth a kick in the ribs.

"Children shouldn't play with matches, you know?" I said.

He looked at me, spit out a mouthful of blood, and started bawling. "We—we'll get you—"

I backhanded him. "You come around here again, I'll plant you for keeps. Now take off."

The three of them staggered away down the street. They didn't say goodby.

I convinced the neighbors there was no need to call the cops—what good would it do? And I didn't

want a doctor. Finally I managed to get to the house, went inside.

By the time Joan got home I'd got the bleeding stopped. She set down an armload of groceries and rushed into the bathroom. At the sight of my battered face she screamed softly.

While she got me patched up I told her the story. I settled down in the livingroom with a tall drink. Joan went back into the bathroom and vomited.

Later, she slumped down on the sofa beside me. "This is just—too much," she said weakly.

I poured us both a drink. "They won't be back."

We sat in silence, sipping our drinks. What had I told that kid? "Children shouldn't play with matches." And wasn't that just what they were doing? Playing around with emotions they didn't understand, trying to be what they thought was grown-up before they were dry behind the ears.

I shook my head and winced at the pain. I looked at the windows. It was getting dark outside. I asked the question that had been bothering me: "Where's Pat?"

"Over at Betty's." My wife's eyes widened. "You don't think Pat and her friends had anything to do with this?"

"No, of course not. I just wondered where she was."

Joan went to the windows, looked out at the deepening twilight. "She'll be here any minute now."

Suddenly Joan turned. "You've got to stop writing stuff about that boy. It's not worth it. You've got to stop."

I finished my drink. "Oh no," I said softly. "I'm just getting started—"

The rock smashed through the window, showering Joan with glass, missing her head by only a few inches.

Joan went to bed early that night. She wasn't hurt by the flying glass —not physically. She hung on until Pat got home, wide-eyed and scared when she saw us, and during a sketchy dinner. Then Joan went in our bedroom, fell across the bed, and let it all out. She cried like a baby.

Right then there wasn't a thing I could do or say, so I left her alone.

Pat was washing the dishes in the kitchen. I picked up a towel and helped her, fumbling at the dishes with my beat-up hands. Pat talked constantly, nervously, about the whole thing. She couldn't look at my bandaged cheek.

She let slip that she had mentioned our phone number to some of her—friends—in the Jerry Tymes fan club. So that was that. It was hard to believe—I'd known most of Pat's friends since they were babies. But it had to be them.

"Which ones made the calls, Patty?" I asked her gently. "Who

were the boys they brought over here, this afternoon?"

"I don't know." Her voice rose. "I don't know anything about it. I don't—I don't—"

I pulled her into my arms. "Alright. Alright."

She was trembling violently. She clung to me. "Please," she whispered urgently, "please, Daddy. Don't write anymore about Jerry."

For a moment she was my little girl again. I patted her back awkwardly, soothing her.

"That's my job, Patty."

She jerked free, and the moment was gone. "Don't you understand? They—they think I told you things to write about him. They think I've turned against the fan club"—the words tumbled out—"and I am—was—the vice-president and—"

The ridiculousness of the thing suddenly hit me. All of it. I started laughing and couldn't stop. Pat stared at me with growing anger. I sprawled in a chair and pounded the table-top with my sore fist. Pat ran to the door, her face white with fear and anger.

She screamed: "Damn it, don't you *understand?* They'll take it out on *me*—they'll *kill* me!"

I whooped, shaking my head helplessly. Kids — kids — always dramatizing, exaggerating — not having a new party dress is a national crisis—a few cracks printed in a newspaper about some two-bit singer was the end of the universe.

"Jerry Tymes for president," I gargled. "Jerry Tymes—king of the world." I laughed until my sides hurt.

I laughed until the cut on my cheek opened and fresh blood soaked the bandage, trickled down my neck. Kids—kids.

The overdose of whisky I'd had spurted into my throat, dribbled from my lips, almost strangling me. But I couldn't stop laughing. I sat there pounding the table, and in the end I didn't know whether I was laughing or crying, or both.

But that was the end of my part in the stupid mess—or so I thought. I didn't mind punks trying to slap me down, and I didn't mind the flood of filthy threatening letters that poured into the newspaper offices, and the rest of it.

But I did mind—very much—rocks thrown at my wife, and my kid going around scared out of her wits. So I dropped the subject of Jerry Tymes in my column. Let some other Sir Galahad worry about him and his kind.

Sure, the paper made a big play about my run-in with the three boys, and there were a couple of editorials calling for action. But it was all over in a few days, and things got back to normal. No more phone calls, no more threats.

Then about a week later, Pat didn't come home from school.

"Hell, she's just gone downtown to a movie, and didn't think to call

and let you know," I said to Joan.

Six o'clock came and went. It was raining steadily, and Joan fretted. "She hasn't got her raincoat with her. She'll catch a cold."

"She'll catch a cab instead," I wisecracked. But I couldn't sit still. I wasn't worried—just restless. Hell, what was there to worry about?

I rubbed a finger along the fresh scar on my cheek.

Joan started calling Pat's friends. No one had seen her. Or so they said. It kept raining.

Finally Joan told me in a tight voice, "If she isn't here soon I'm going to call the police—"

The doorbell buzzed. "Here she is now," I said, trying to hide the relief I felt. "Forgot her key again."

I went to the door, opened it. The stinging rain slanted in, cold on my face. No one was there. A car without lights took off down the street, but I couldn't see it in the darkness.

Joan suddenly screamed. I saw what lay at my feet on the front steps. The wet black world tilted crazily. "Pat!"

I picked up the small, crumpled body and carried it inside and laid it on the sofa. The smashed face grinned at nothing. The broken neck rolled loosely.

Joan fell on her knees, wildly sobbing, trying to find a pulse that wasn't there. I felt completely numb. Like a man shot through the guts. Slowly my eyes focused on Pat's small breasts, poking up through the sodden, blood-stained shreds of her blouse. The white flesh was disfigured with livid burns.

A thought drifted slowly through my mind: "Kids shouldn't play with matches—shouldn't play with matches—shouldn't—"

What was it Pat had told me? "They'll take it out on me," she'd said. *"They'll kill me."*

Silly kid talk. Kid talk.

"She's dead," Joan said. She looked up at me wonderingly. "Pat's dead."

The phone rang. I picked it up and out of the gray hazy fog around me came a sly giggle. "What you say, big man? You feel like writing anything else about Jerry Tymes, big man?"

But I knew who they were now, and I knew what I had to do. I said gently into the phone: "I'll be seeing you." And the giggling suddenly stopped. "I'll see you—real soon."

Addicted to absinthe, his need for power insatiable, the captain ruled his ship like a malevolent god.

BY ROBERT EDMOND ALTER

ABSINTHE FOR SUPERMAN

MASON WAS too young for old sailors' superstitions, as a rule he scoffed at the salty old omens and placed them in a private category he called 'hangovers from the dim days of wooden ships and iron-headed men'. But the moment that he approached the small cargo steamer, Duff, a wisp of foreboding touched him.

The Duff lay in the red eye of the setting moon, at the far end of a lonely wharf. As he approached the ship rose above him, shadowy, antique and forlorn.

Perhaps it wasn't really the ship itself that bothered him, it might only be the solitary figure that stood unmoving on the port wing of the bridge, like a black statue watching the sea with cold eyes. Mason hitched his duffle to a new position on his shoulder and turned away. Behind him the lights of Papette winked and glowed like a cluster of stars.

A floodlight at the head of the gangway suddenly snapped on, making everything except its own circle of yellow, a total black. Mason blinked and momentarily lost his equilibrium. He started up the gangplank as a ship's officer materialized under the glare of light at the rail. It was a chief engineer, a blunt, stocky man, with a homely, worried face.

The chief touched his cap and nodded at Mason. "You the new Second?" he asked in a whisper.

Mason thought there might be something wrong with the chief's throat. "Yes," he replied, "my name's—"

But the chief popped a pudgy finger up to his pursed lips and made a motion with his head toward the bridge. "Softly, mate," he whispered, "the old man's in one of his moods."

What puzzled Mason was that none of the officers in the deck house wanted to discuss Captain Gann's moods. The chief talked in whispers, shrugged and looked worried; the first mate, a rangy, rawboned, angry-looking man, shook his head and scowled; and Sparks, the only other white man on board, and therefore allowed to live with the officers, grinned and tapped his head, and muttered: "Nuts!"

The Duff cleared the channel in the first pale glint of dawn and put to sea for Nuku Hiva. Within two hours Tahiti was nothing but a wavering thread of black outlined against the pink glow of sunrise.

Mason stood a twelve hour watch and ate three meals with the other officers in the cuddy, but he had still not met Gann. At the beginning of each meal he would pick up his napkin and then ask: "Where's the captain?" but always the negative reply: "In his mood," would answer him.

On the second day, at lunch, he became annoyed with the mystery, and when he heard the inevitable "In his mood" he threw his napkin down and leaned toward the first mate.

"What do you mean? What is his mood? Is he crazy?"

But the chief spluttered in his coffee cup, and threw a look of fear over his shoulder. He stood up, red in the face, and left the cabin.

The first mate scowled after him, and spoke in a short angry tone.

"You'll see soon enough. Now let me enjoy my lunch."

Mason began to see that afternoon. He was off duty, and relaxing on his bunk with a dog-eared book, the door of his cabin open in the vain hope that a cooling breeze would find its way in. His eye slid away from the printed page and he saw a shadow laying on the deck.

"What are you reading?" a quiet voice demanded.

Mason looked up with a start and found Gann standing in the passageway watching him. He knew it was the captain, there could be no mistake about that. If Gann had been standing naked before him, Mason would have known him. As it was he wore nothing that resembled a uniform. His trousers were faded denims, his shirt white, long-sleeved and open at the neck. A plain black cap was on his head.

But Mason was interested in his face. The eyes were narrowed slits with glints of callousness, cunning and self-certainty, they seemed capable of looking through flesh and bone and into the minds and hearts of men. His nose was thin, aristocratic. His mouth was a narrow, slitted match for his eyes. Overall there was a satanic quality to the strong face that disturbed Mason.

"It's Mardi," he replied, and as an afterthought he added, "By Melville."

Gann stood quietly in the passageway, his arms akimbo, and seemed to consider the reply with deliberation. He looked up suddenly. "Do you read much?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Been to college? Studied literature? Philosophy?"

Mason nodded. "Yes, I have."

Gann's hands fell suddenly away from his hips and he spun on his heel. "Follow me," he said over his shoulder.

Gann's cabin was small and close. A rumpled bunk topped a long louvered cupboard. A deal table, littered with papers and pencils, jutted out from the bulkhead. A battered wall locker, a chest, two portholes, a tarnished mirror and a row of faded books.

The captain flicked a casual glance at Mason. "Look at them," he said.

Mason felt uncomfortable without knowing exactly why. He stepped across the cabin and read the faded titles. In Praise of Folly, The Prince, Ludwig's Napoleon, The Teachings of Friedrich Nietzsche, The Philosophy of Nietzsche, were some that his eye picked out immediately. Show me what you read and I'll tell you what you are, he thought.

Gann was at the speaking tube calling the bridge.

"First," he said, "You'll have to fill in for Mr. Mason for the next few days. We'll be busy talking."

The first mate's voice came back

in an angry rasp. "But, sir, we're short handed as it is!"

Mason turned away from the book rack and looked at Gann. The captain's back had stiffened, and Mason could see the tight knots of muscle bunch up under his shirt. There was a hesitancy between the two men joined by the speaking tube that embarrassed the young mate.

"I said," Gann repeated in a low, deliberate voice, "—you'll have to fill in for Mr. Mason."

Again a pause, and then the muted reply: "Aye, aye, sir."

They talked. The hours ticked away and were lost in the abyss of time without Mason's knowledge. Gann held the mate's interest as though he had caught it in his strong, square hand. He was fascinating, but he was disturbing. He believed in the superman whose god was power.

He gave Mason a bottle of whisky and a glass, but for himself he had a tall platinum flask which held a pale green absinthe that he mixed with water. He sipped his drink and seldom refreshed it. Once he said, "I'd offer you some, but there isn't enough—and it's mine."

Mason said nothing, he was watching him and wondering.

"To strength!" Gann said and held his cup up.

By midnight they no longer discussed philosophy, they argued it. Mason had drunk a great deal of whisky and was at times a little high, at other times somber and weary, but Gann was always animated and intense. The room was thick with the swirled smoke from Mason's pipe and Gann's cigars, and they peered at each other's obscured faces across the littered table and searched for each other's souls.

Gann clutched his cup and said, "Nietzsche says that for the ruling class everything that expresses or furthers the will of the individual is good."

Mason said, "I know Nietzsche, he was insane, he made a fetish out of power. What can it get you? What has it ever brought you? A broken down steamer, four white officers, and seven Kanakas for a crew."

Gann laughed as though he were mocking something. "Perhaps that's all I ever wanted, and it's mine. Here I am king, I'm the power and the strength, no man can say me nay!"

"Be careful, Gann," Mason said softly. "Remember what happened to Ahab when he tried to play God and rid the seas of Moby Dick."

"Ahab was a great man," Gann said bitterly, "but Melville was against him."

Dawn glimmered through the two portholes like a pair of pale, dead eyes. The two men argued on through an atmosphere that was like the interior of a sweat box. Their shirts were open down to the

waist, their sleeves rolled up, their expressions sometimes haggard, sometimes angry, sometimes melancholy and weary. They sat now with but inches between their glistening faces.

"At the bottom of everything is the will for power, and all that makes for fullness of life is to be cherished," Gann said.

"There is always the moral concept," Mason replied.

"Morality! Religion!" Gann scoffed, "Pap for the weak. Whereas power—"

"Is an unreality, an illusion," Mason said. "You reach for power and it is gone. If you catch it, you can't hold it."

"Power," Gann said thoughtfully, "is a state of mind."

They stared into each other's eyes for an immeasurable moment, and then Mason began to smile. "In this case," he said, "I'll believe it."

Gann's eyes glittered from beneath his black brows, and Mason sensed he'd gone too far. "Power," Gann said slowly, "is when you want to do something and know that you can, and know that nothing can stop you—like this!" and his hand and forearm arched up and out, like a thick rattlesnake striking, and caught Mason on the point of the jaw.

It had only been a short jab but it lifted Mason out of his chair and threw him back against the closed door. For a moment he was too stunned to even think, then the pain began to spread across his face. He blinked his eyes and looked at Gann.

The captain's eyes were narrowed down to thin slivers of light, his lips were curving into a deep smile. "Now don't go heroic," he said easily, "because I have the strength of ten."

Mason believed him, but the look on Gann's face settled his mind. He came to his feet, lowered his head and charged the sneering face.

A minute later Gann was standing in the open doorway nursing a cut lip, and calling for the steward to come help Mason to his cabin.

Mason slept for three hours and then he woke and sat up in his bunk. He explored different parts of his face, but whatever he touched felt swollen and pained him. He shook his head and reached for his cigarettes. He felt like Don Quixote after the attack on the windmill.

His door banged open and the angry faced first mate stuck his rumpled head in the compartment. "You awake?" He came into the cabin, closing the door behind him, and drew up a chair by Mason's bunk. He studied the young mate's face for a moment and then looked angrier than ever. "The old man do that?" he asked.

Mason nodded. "I asked for it."

The mate snorted, his face showed doubt. "What are you gonna do? Press charges?"

"No," Mason replied. "If I'd planned on that I wouldn't have gone for him. It's too late now. I'll even it up my own way."

The mate snorted again, and looked away. "You won't beat Gann noways, except in a court of law. You know what's been happening since you laid down for your nap? Gann went for the chief."

Mason looked his surprise. The first mate nodded and said, "You know how short handed we are? It don't bother Gann none, he just tells us to work overtime. He's been workin' the chief about twenty hours a day, but this morning the chief ups an' rebels, says he don't hafta work such long shifts. You know what Gann did?"

Mason shook his head wondering if the chief was laying in his bunk with a battered face.

"He put him on the foredeck chippin' paint for two hours. Stood over him and saw that he did it, everytime the chief would stand up to quit, Gann would knock him down. Nice ship you bought a ticket on!" The first mate leaned back in the chair and stared at Mason contemptuously.

"My God," Mason cried, "he can't do that to an officer."

"Go tell him he can't," the first mate suggested. He leaned forward and hitched up his chair, his voice lowered. "I don't know what you're gonna do, but I'm through. I'm relieving myself of duty as of now."

"He won't let you," Mason said.

The first mate drew a heavy forty-five automatic out of his coat pocket and showed it to Mason. "He won't be able to stop me. If he gets within ten feet of me—he's dead."

An hour later Mason heard the first shot splinter through the monotonous drone of the diesel engines. He swung his legs over the edge of the bunk and sat listening. He thought the first mate had killed Gann.

The clump-clump sound of feet running across the metal decks above reached him, then a second shot cracked out, and he came to his feet and rushed for the door. Just as he entered the passageway a third shot sounded, and then a fourth. He ran out of the deckhouse and went aft toward the ladder leading up to the bridge. Ahead of him fled two Kanakas, but the bridge held no interest for them, they fled out across the boat deck to where their mates were swinging out the starboard lifeboat.

When Mason reached the wing of the bridge he paused for a moment at the rail and gasped for breath, then he stepped over the flange of the door and into the wheelhouse. It was empty. But the radio room was not. Sparks was sitting in the gloom, leaning back in his swivel chair, his head laying over on his left shoulder, his eyes glazed and unseeing.

Mason stepped through a thick mixture of horror and sickness and went down to the captain's cabin. The first mate was lying on the deck, on his back, with both hands clasped over his breast. Blood was everywhere. His eyes blinked open painfully and focused on the young mate. "Run for it, Mason," he whispered, "he's gone amuck. He'll get you next." His eyes closed, and for once the angry face looked calm and content.

The shooting began again, sporadic but deliberate. Someone cried out and the sound trembled between the throb of the ship and the crack of the gun. He rushed back to the wing of the bridge and looked aft across the boat deck. One of the Kanakas was lying motionless on the sun-glazed deck, but the boat had been lowered, and the last two natives were just leaping over the side.

Mason turned away, not quite sure what he should do next. Gann was somewhere on the boat deck out of his line of vision. Perhaps there was time to find a weapon. He hurried noiselessly down to the starboard gangway but was brought up short by the sudden sight of the chief's body laying in a deep blue shadow just within the passageway. At that moment he finally realized the spot he was in. The Kanakas had fled leaving four dead men behind them. Mason was alone on a drifting ship with a madman.

"There you are, Mr. Mason, I've been looking for you," the captain's quiet voice spoke from behind him. "You're not still angry about our fight, are you?"

The panic that had been building inside of Mason became complete. For a moment all he could think of was to throw himself over the rail, but he resisted the impulse, took a deep breath and turned slowly around. His lips formed a tight smile as he faced Gann. "No," he said, "I'm not angry."

Gann's face was strangely calm, he was even smiling, but the narrowed slits were open now and his eyes sparkled like two tongues of flame looking for something to devour. The automatic, the mate's automatic, was in his hand hanging idle by his side.

"Run out of bullets?" Mason asked casually.

Gann lifted the weapon up and looked at it. "The gun—" he muttered, and with a quick jerk of his hand he sent it spinning over the side. "I don't like guns, never used one before, but when that fool pointed it at me—something came over me—" He broke off suddenly and smiled again. "Well, Mason, let's repair to my cabin and have a drink."

Mason felt that a weight had been lifted from his chest with the passing of the automatic, but he wasn't going to become foolish now. "No thank you, sir," he said, "I don't feel like one. I think I'll stay on deck for a while."

Gann nodded and smiled. "All right, Mason, I just thought you'd like a drink from my flask, there's a few drops left."

But Mason wasn't being caught that easily. He still smiled but the muscles in his face were beginning to ache from the strain. "Some other time, sir," he said.

Gann moved forward, and Mason stepped backward quickly. "Of course," the captain said, and he stepped through the doorway and over the dead chief.

Mason searched feverishly through the officers' cabins. If he could find a gun he knew what he would have to do; he would go above and shoot Gann down like a mad dog. He held no illusions about what would happen if he tried to meet Gann barehanded, the insane man would tear him to pieces.

Something struck the water on the portside with a solid blow. He gave up the search and went out on the gangway. Drifting astern was the port lifeboat. Gann had cut it loose from the davits. Mason felt sick, he leaned on the rail and rubbed at his face with a trembling hand. He should have jumped overboard with the Kanakas and swam for the boat.

He straightened up, considering. There was still the radio. If he could find Spark's code book and dope it out, he could send a call for help. But Gann was up there somewhere. He would have to wait for an opportunity.

He was in the cuddy eating a chunk of bread and cheese when he heard the heavy watertight door of the starboard passage close. He stopped chewing and listened. A slight rasping noise reached him in the quiet gloom, it was repeated, and Mason frowned. Suddenly he knew what it was. Gann was tightening the dog handles, locking him in the deckhouse.

He heard Gann move off forward and knew that he was going around the deckhouse to block off the port passageway. Good, he wasn't caught yet. He moved hurriedly aft through the galley and out onto the aft deck through the galley service door.

In a moment Gann came along the gangway. He was smiling, he seemed sure of himself. He paused at the railing when he saw Mason standing near the Number Three hatch. The smile seemed to freeze in his face. "Oh," he said, "I thought you were in the deckhouse."

"I know you did," Mason replied.

Gann came down the steps leisurely and started walking toward him. Mason moved away and he followed. They went around the hatches, circled the cargo mast, went up on the fan-tail, around the afterhouse and back down to the cargo deck again. Gann was smiling all the while, but Mason's face was tight and drawn now. Gann had settled down to business.

Mason led the way up across the starboard gangway. He paused long enough to undog the watertight door. He might need that passageway later. They went down on the maindeck keeping Number Two hatch between them, and Mason was beginning to wonder how long this would last. Suddenly the smile dropped from Gann's face and his eyes popped open, glowing with hate. He sprang up on the hatch cover and dashed toward Mason.

Mason turned and fled to the foredeck. He could hear Gann cursing behind him. They went up the starboard side, across the deck and down the port, back across the deck and through the deckhouse. Gann had the agility of an ape, and he was untiring; fear alone propelled Mason.

Certain sections of the ship were restricted to Mason as unsafe. The forecastle, the afterhouse, any of the cabins that contained only one door were definitely out of the question. Gann could trap him too easily.

Once on the boat deck he was nearly cornered. To save himself he went over the rail in a scramble and dropped down to the starboard gangway below. As he stumbled back into the passageway of the deckhouse a well of laughter went pealing after him. It was the sudden laughter of madness. At the sound of it Mason's heart froze and his mind scattered in panic.

He paused in the cuddy and forced control back over his trembling nerves. He couldn't keep this up. Gann would run him down sooner or later, there was too much on the captain's side, and madness was his greatest asset.

He made his way cautiously up to Gann's cabin. He needed rest badly, Gann would have to be tricked. He went past the still form of the first mate with averted eyes and found pencil and paper and started to form a note, then his eye fell on the flask sitting on the desk. He shoved it down inside his shirt out of spite. The note was simple, it said:

> Gann, if you want me you'll have to come out in the water to get me. Where is your power now?
>
> P.S. I've taken your flask to keep me warm.

He left the note on the deal table and opened the louvered door of the cupboard beneath Gann's bunk. It was nearly empty, a few old nautical books reposed in a dark corner. Quickly he crawled in and pulled the louver after him. It was possible that Gann would never think to look in his own cabin.

He must have dozed, he opened his eyes suddenly and his heart felt like a giant boulder slowly tipping over a trembling cliff. Gann was in the room with him.

A foot moved near the cupboard, struck something, and Gann's voice muttered, "Damn!" Mason stopped

breathing. Gann was moving again, away from the cupboard. Mason wondered if he was looking for his flask. It was impossible to see through the close fitted louvers. He allowed himself a soundless breath and listened.

Paper rustled, and then a deep hush fell over the cabin. Mason waited, wondering. Sweat broke out on his face and dripped from his nose. His armpits turned icy. The cupboard was close and airless, he felt sick, he was afraid he would have to—

Gann screamed, or bellowed. It was a roar of sound that quivered with rage, pain and frustration. It vibrated against the steel walls of the cabin, it burst into Mason's tight sanctuary, and he opened his mouth against it as a man will against concussion. For a moment he almost cried out.

It came again, and through it he could hear Gann's feet clumping against the steel, then the sound echoed down the passageway and faded out of hearing.

Mason crawled out of the cupboard. The first thing he saw was the note crumpled and lying on the deck.

Silently he entered the wheelhouse and looked down on the cargo deck. Gann was everywhere, his cries rebounded against the pale afternoon sky. He tore at the metal, canvas, wood and ropes with his bare hands. Even from the wheelhouse, Mason could see that they were bright scarlet with blood.

Gann plunged down into the forecastle and his cries rushing up after him through the open companionway sounded as though he had broken through the door to Hell. In a moment he was back on deck. His mouth was open, and his lips bloody, his eyes sparkled like specks of glass in the sun. He jumped to the center of Number One hatch and lifted his face to the sky. His voice roared with bewildered fury.

"Where! Where has he gone?" He screamed into the void of nothingness. He waited as though he hoped for an answer, but even to his distracted mind there was no reply. Slowly his clenched fist unfolded and dropped to his sides. His head lowered painfully, and he turned as though it were doubtful if he could, and moved over to the port bulwark. He leaned there for a moment watching the sea, then his head went down on the steel rail, and Mason could see his back tremble.

He realized, after a long moment of no thought at all, that Gann had had it. It might be possible that he could take him now. He slipped off his shoes and made his way down to the port gangway. He hoped that he could find a weapon of some sort.

He stopped suddenly, all his old terror rushing back to him. Gann had straightened up from the rail and was coming aft. Mason ran

nimbly to the open door and stepped into the silent passageway. He flattened himself against the bulkhead, watching the square of light.

Gann was coming up the steps slowly, Mason could hear him talking to himself. But something was different. He frowned, wondering, and then realized it was Gann's voice. It was low, plaintive, almost tearful, it had the curious sing-song pitch of a child. He couldn't make out the words at first, but as Gann neared the door they became audible.

"Superman, Superman, Superman!"

Gann passed the door, his head was down on his chest, his feet were dragging. He didn't look right or left. Mason doubted if he really saw anything.

The sound of Gann's voice floated back, but the words were lost to Mason. He stood in the quiet passageway, buried in the deep blue shadows and repeated the words to himself. He straightened up after a moment; he thought he understood.

He stepped out on the gangway and looked aft. Gann was walking across the cargo deck. Mason thought he must still be talking to himself. Gann went up the steps and out across the fan-tail. He never looked up, he just kept walking. He didn't even pause at the taffrail.

Mason gasped like a sleeper awaking in the atmosphere of sudden shock. The last he saw of Gann were his legs as they flipped over the rail.

The boy stuck the pistol back in his waistband and squatted down, putting his face close to the face of the dying man. "How about that?" he whispered.

BRONCO

BY

ROY KOCH

THE BIG Cadillac pulled up onto the shoulder about a hundred yards ahead of the boy. With a whirring of its transmission it leapt back toward him. He wiped the dust from his eyes and blinked as a uniformed chauffeur opened the car door.

"Which way to Blaylock, Sonny?"

The boy pulled a red bandana from a pocket of his denims and blew his nose. Folding the cloth carefully, he began to wipe the perspiration from his forehead. The chauffeur stepped out of the car

and walked over to the boy. He was almost a foot taller and his natty gray uniform contrasted with the boy's ragged denims.

"Sonny, I asked you a question."

The boy ran his tongue over his lips. His liquid brown eyes stared amiably at the taller man. The chauffeur laughed.

"Well, I see you got a tongue anyway, Sonny. Let's just cut out the crap and you show us the way to Blaylock."

The boy pulled a ragged, imitation leather wallet from his back pocket. It was a very old wallet with the word BRONCO stitched across it in colored beads. He opened it and took out a photograph which he held up to the chauffeur.

"That's my wife, Ina Lee. She's dead."

He put the photograph back into the wallet and replaced it in his pocket. The chauffeur stepped toward the boy and he drew away.

"Listen, Kid, I'm sorry about that."

"Look here, my name's not Kid any more than it's Sonny."

"Okay, I'm sorry."

"Well, that's all right."

The uniformed man motioned the boy over to the car. As they walked he drew a folded road map from his tunic. Peering into the back section of the car, he opened the road map and spread it out on the hood. The boy leaned over the fender and gazed admiringly at the map.

"Well now, that's quite some map you've got there. I guess I've been driving around for close on five years but I never have quite got onto these maps. I don't believe I ever will, to tell the plain truth."

He looked at the chauffeur and grinned.

"Why do you keep the motor running?"

"The air conditioner. Say listen, I've got to get to Blaylock by eight. Can't you even tell me if I'm headed toward the State Road or not?"

The boy bit his lip and peered at the map. The chauffeur slapped him on the shoulder and squeezed his arm.

"What about it?"

The boy shook off the bigger man's hand and danced out of reach around the front of the car. A truck roared by.

"What's the trouble with you, Boy?"

"My name's not Boy either."

"All right, for Chrissakes, Bronco then, or whatever the Hell it is."

The boy edged around the fender toward the chauffeur. He had a revolver in his right hand. His left hand hung limply at his side.

"Say, what is this? You just take it easy with that gun, Boy."

The boy raised his eyebrows slightly and the chauffeur began to back slowly toward the car with his hands extended.

"Now listen here. Don't go and do something you're gonna regret. Captain Farrow in the back there

is very big in this state. You can't get away with anything."

"I'm not from this state."

The big man dropped his hands with a sigh of relief.

"Now why couldn't you say that? All we wanted were directions?"

"I didn't ask you to stop. What's the matter with that man in the back?"

He pointed to the rear door of the Cadillac with the barrel of his pistol.

"He's asleep. We been travelling since this morning. We got to make Blaylock by eight o'clock. We're expected. You can't get away with anything so why don't you put the gun away and we'll give you a lift. Just like nothing ever happened. Okay? How about that?"

The uniformed man spread his arms and smiled, walking toward the boy. As he approached the boy shot him twice in the middle of the chest. He fell back against the fender of the car with a look of surprise on his face. With his left hand he reached up to unbutton his tunic. As he struggled with the top he slid down the fender and lay on the ground beside the car. The boy walked over to him and squatted down. He put his face close to the face of the dying man.

"How about that?"

The chauffeur did not move. The rear door opened and a dapper little man got out yawning and rubbing his eyes. He was wearing a blue pin-striped suit with a pearl gray vest and carrying a silver-topped stick. He looked down at the man on the ground and at the boy with the gun.

"What in the Hell is all this about?"

The boy lifted the pistol and aimed it at the little man's chest. He fired twice. The bullets made a popping sound as they tore through the gray vest. The little man reeled back against the open door and sat down heavily, his hand still clutching the walking stick. His head lolled back against the open door. The boy walked over and peered closely at him. His eyes were closed but his face was set in an expression of outraged indignation.

The boy sat down on the front seat of the car and broke open his revolver. He worked the ejector and the four spent shells dribbled out of the cylinder along with two complete cartridges. He bent forward and picked up the two good bullets. Taking out his bandana, he wiped them clean and replaced them in the cylinder of the revolver. He took a small paper bag from the pocket of his denim jacket and shook three cartridges into his hand. He inserted them in the revolver and snapped it shut. Putting the gun in the waistband of his jeans the boy leaned across the front seat of the car and opened the door of the glove compartment. A .45 caliber automatic fell out onto the floor. The boy picked it up and

sat upright in the front seat looking at the pistol in his hand.

"Jesus Christ!"

At the sound of the voice the boy jumped out of the car holding the automatic in both hands. A girl was leaning forward in the back seat staring at the body of the little man in the gray vest.

When they reached the State Road the boy turned to the girl by his side.

"Miss, I don't believe I know how to turn off that air conditioning machine."

The girl reached under the dashboard and the hissing sound of the air conditioner stopped. The boy swung the Cadillac out onto the highway and headed South. He looked at the girl and smiled. She was very pretty.

"I'm sorry about you getting messed up with me and all, Miss. I don't mean to do you harm though. I really mean that. I really do, Miss."

The girl continued to stare straight ahead through the windshield. Her eyes seemed to be fixed on a point that moved along far in front of the speeding automobile.

"I don't mean for you to worry, Miss. I'm going a long way and I can't be taking a nice young lady with me."

He smiled at the girl.

"I'll just have to put you up someplace when it gets dark. I'll see to it that you're safe. Now don't you worry at all about it. Hear?"

He leaned forward and looked at the girl's face.

"I didn't mean you to be scared by all the fussing back there. I didn't even see you in the car with the shades all down. All I want is the car."

With a sudden sigh the girl slumped in the seat and closed her eyes. The boy looked over at her.

"Are you all right, Miss? Shall I stop?"

The girl opened her eyes and looked up at him. Her face betrayed no emotion.

"Who the Hell are you anyway?"

The boy looked shocked. He blushed and licked his lips.

"Well?"

The girl was angry. She reached over and hit the boy on the arm with the back of her hand.

"My name is Willie Texas, Miss."

The girl looked at him unbelievingly.

"Willie Texas?"

"Willie Texas Dunham, Miss."

The girl stared at him for a moment then put her head in her hands and began to sob. She wept loudly, rocking back and forth on the seat.

"I wish you wouldn't cry, Miss. I don't mean you harm. I'm sorry you got messed up with me."

The girl continued to sob. Willie Texas held out his bandana. She took it and rolled it into a tight ball in her hands.

"I wish you wouldn't cry, Miss. I..."

The girl lunged over at Willie Texas. With one motion she opened the door and tried to push him out. Taken by surprise, he had to hang onto the wheel as the door swung open. The car swerved crazily off the road and came to a stop with its front wheels in the drainage ditch. Pushing open her door, the girl scrambled out. Willie Texas slid across the seat and caught her dress as she went. The door slammed on his wrist but he hung on. The girl's blouse was ripped completely off her left shoulder. Willie Texas drew the revolver from the waistband of his jeans and held it against the girl's bare flesh. She drew herself up against the side of the car and looked down at the gun pressing into her.

"Please don't shoot me. Please..."

Her voice trailed off into silence as she stared at the revolver. Willie Texas looked into her eyes and lifted the pistol until it pointed at the girl's head. Closing his left eye, he sighted carefully along the barrel and squeezed the trigger. The hammer clicked on an empty chamber. Willie Texas stared at the gun wonderingly. Pointing it at the ground he pulled the trigger and sent a bullet ricocheting into the woods alongside the road. The girl watched as he stuck the revolver back into his jeans. Her hands hung at her sides and she made no attempt to cover herself.

"Get back into the car, Miss. We've got to get back on the road now."

The girl climbed into the car pulling the torn blouse over her. Willie Texas put the Cadillac into reverse and backed out of the ditch onto the highway.

"You come as near getting killed as anyone ever comes, Miss."

He smiled at the girl who sat clutching her arms across her chest.

"You sure are lucky. I was fixing to kill you for what you done and I would have too, if it wasn't for your luck. You sure are lucky, Miss."

It was dark and the headlights of the Cadillac illuminated the scrub pine forest on either side of the road. The girl slid closer to Willie Texas.

"As soon as you come to a place where you can pull off the road, let's stop."

"Are you all right, Miss?"

"I just want to stop, Willie Texas."

The boy pulled the Cadillac onto the shoulder and switched off the lights. He let the big car roll until it was well into the cover of the scrub pines. It was very dark. Two cars flashed by on the road.

"I can't let you get out alone, Miss."

"I don't want to get out, Willie Texas."

Willie Texas could hear the girl breathing. He reached out to touch her. Her warm flesh pressed against his hand. Her hand touched his.

She took the pistol from him and he heard it drop heavily onto the floor. He tried to slide from under the steering wheel. The girl held him tightly.

"In the back, Willie Texas."

He tried to move again but she held him even more tightly.

"Now, Willie Texas. In the back. Please. Now."

The girl stretched and yawned, rubbed her feet against the soft floor rug. It was hot in the closed car. She reached across the boy curled up in the corner of the seat and rolled down the window. Although it was still dark outside, the girl could make out the spiny shapes of the scrub pines that overhung the car. It was perfectly still.

Willie Texas groaned in his sleep and the girl pressed herself against him. She ran her hand through his hair but he did not stir. Gathering up her clothes from the koor, she shook the wrinkles from them. Slowly and carefully, the girl dressed herself in the darkness. When she had finished she picked up the tangled denims and hung them over the open window. The girl shook Willie Texas but he continued to sleep, breathing slowly and heavily. She forced his arm into the sleeve of his tattered shirt and struggled to pull it over his back. The girl dressed Willie Texas laboriously, like a child dressing an oversize doll. He did not awaken. When she had finished the girl slumped back in her corner of the seat. She suddenly felt tired and closed her eyes. As she did she became aware of a sudden movement at the window. A man was outlined in the darkness.

Willie Texas started awake at her scream. He clutched both hands to his chest and ran them down to his waist. The car was flooded with light and the door was flung open. Willie Texas blinked in the light and continued to grope at his waist. A man's voice was shouting his name. He slid off the seat and ran his hand over the rug. The light was blinding. He held up a hand to shield his eyes and a bullet struck him in the top of his head. He settled to the floor with one arm folded under him. His body rested on the girl's feet, pinning her legs to the seat.

The girl looked at the man seated next to her. He smiled and took her hand. He had white hair and a very red face. They were in the back seat of a police car. The siren wailed and the girl saw the reflection of the red light speeding along the scrub pines by the side of the road.

"It's all over now, Miss Farrow. We've got an ambulance ready for you in Blaylock. We'll be there in about twenty minutes."

The girl nodded at the man. He squeezed her hand and let it go.

"I'm Special Agent Foster, FBI. We'll have to have a talk but it can wait. We're glad enough to have you safe and sound."

"Blaylock? Were we near Blaylock?"

The FBI man looked at the girl without speaking.

"I don't remember getting into this car."

"Now you just take it easy, Miss Farrow. There's absolutely no need to worry yourself about anything now. You just leave everything to us."

The girl threw her head back suddenly.

"Oh Christ!"

Foster reached for the girl's hand but she pulled away.

"Oh God! Leave me alone, will you! Christ!"

"All right. You just try and calm yourself now. Nobody's going to hurt you now. Everything's going to be just fine. We'll be in Blaylock in two shakes of a dead lamb's tail."

The girl laughed at the older man's words and he smiled at her. He reached over and patted her hand again. She didn't move.

"There we are. We know what you've been through but from here on in everything's going to be just fine. Just don't you worry about a thing."

The girl smiled sadly at Foster and he broke into a broad grin.

"Well, that's just fine. You're a wonderful girl."

He patted her hand again.

"Mr. Foster, who was that boy?"

Foster pursed his lips and the smile faded from his face.

"Look, Miss Farrow, maybe we'd better just wait a little. I honestly don't think this is the time to bring it up. You've been through quite a lot."

"I want to know. Please, Mr. Foster."

The FBI man clasped his hands nervously.

"Well, for one thing, I guess I should tell you that your uncle and Summers are both dead."

The girl nodded and the older man continued to knead his hands.

"Well, then we got word that the Cadillac had been spotted. We went in with the State Police and that's about all there was to it. You'd be better off to try and put it out of your mind, Miss Farrow."

"But who was that boy. Don't you even know who he was?"

Foster cleared his throat and looked sternly at the girl.

"Look here, Miss Farrow, I think we had better get this straight. That boy was a dangerous criminal. You're very, very lucky to be alive. In the past ten days he's killed five people, including his own wife and child. Every cop in the country has been looking for him. He was a mad dog. Maybe now you can see why we're so glad to have gotten you out alive."

The girl slumped back in the seat. She shook her head slowly.

"Oh Christ!"

Foster patted the girl's hand and looked nervously at her face. He couldn't tell what was wrong.

"Now I don't want you fretting over what might have been. There's no sense in that. It's all over now. I wish you'd try and rest. There'll be plenty of time to talk about it later on. You just try and get it off your mind for a little while now."

The girl closed her eyes and squeezed into the corner of the seat. Without a sound she began to weep. The tears streamed down her cheeks and Foster wiped her eyes with his handkerchief. She continued to weep in silence and he put the handkerchief into her hand. He stared gloomily at the floor and saw a battered object lying by the girl's foot. He reached down and picked it up. It was a wallet with the word BRONCO stitched across it in colored beads. He turned it over in his hands. The girl looked at it. He smiled at her.

"Bronco. Funny."

He leaned forward to open the glass partition that separated them from the State Troopers in the front seat. The girl held his arm.

"It's mine."

She took the wallet and wrapped it up carefully in Foster's handkerchief. The FBI Agent looked at her sadly then turned away and stared out the window. It was getting light but he could still see the stars.

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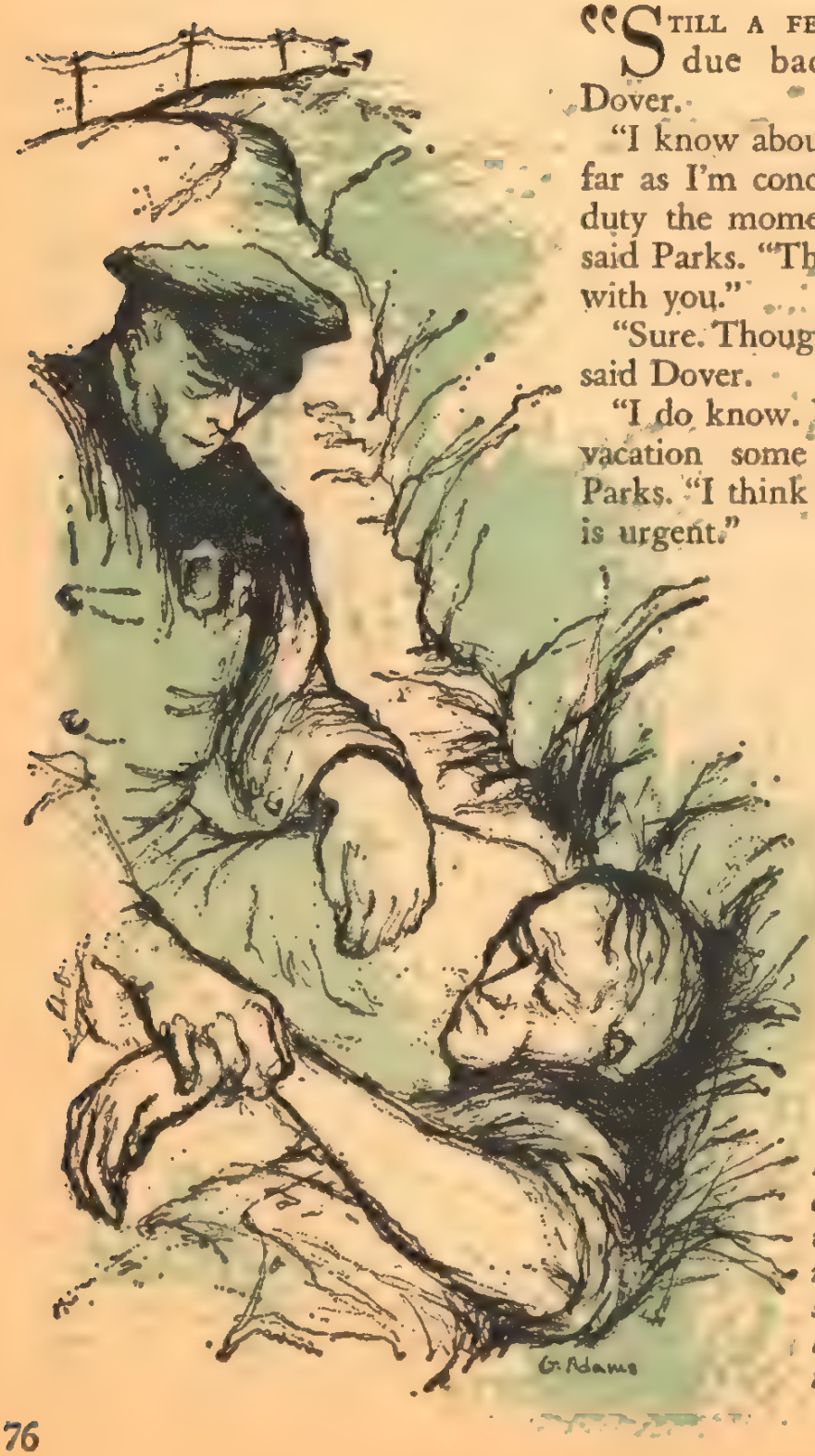


"STILL A FEW days before I'm due back," said George Dover.

"I know about your vacation. As far as I'm concerned you went on duty the moment I sent for you," said Parks. "That is, if it's all right with you."

"Sure. Thought I'd let you know," said Dover.

"I do know. You can finish your vacation some other time," said Parks. "I think you know why this is urgent."

BY FLOYD WALLACE

He lay on his stomach, knowing they were stabbing him repeatedly. He didn't see them, he didn't have to to know who they were.

"I suppose I do. Ed Mavaradian."

"Mostly. And I might remind you that he wasn't on duty when he got killed, if that's any comfort to you."

"Doesn't help a bit. Do I know everything?"

"There isn't much anyone knows. We think we're looking for a couple of punks, kids. They were probably stomping the old man when Mavaradian ran across them."

"We don't actually know that they're JD's?"

"It's a good guess but no more than that. We found Mavaradian a few blocks from the old man's house. We think he chased them and maybe cornered one of them, but we aren't sure. These toughs slipped a knife in and then they both finished him off."

"Sounds like Mavaradian. He wasn't careful," said Dover. "Any reason for stomping the old man?"

"Since when do delinquents need a reason?" said Parks. "Actually there was a damned good reason but we aren't sure these toughs were aware of it."

"Money?"

"We found ten thousand in his house," said Parks. "Tens and twenties hidden in every conceivable place. This may have been all there was or perhaps the kids took most of it."

"The old man's still alive. He should be able to tell us what he had."

"He doesn't know. He was senile before this happened and should have been in an institution. Now it's all he can do to remember his own name, and that he was beaten by two kids."

"What about a description?"

"None. Just that they were two typical jeanagers, fifteen to twenty two. This covers a lot of territory. Take your pick of any of them," said Parks. He looked at Dover. "I don't suppose it will do much good to remind you that they killed a policeman."

"It sure does. Tell me," said Dover.

"The hell with it. Find them any way you want, for any reason. Just bring them in."

"First I have to find them," said Dover, standing up. "Who am I working with?"

"In a case like this I like to have everybody paired off, but you know how it is. The rest of them have been assigned and there's no one left. I guess it's for the best. You seem to do better when you're alone."

"Suits me. No one to louse me up," said Dover. He was going out when Parks stopped him.

"Dover."

"Yeah?"

"I can't understand how you got to be a policeman but if you run across these killers, kids or not, remember that you are one."

Dover grinned. "I'm not bawling my eyes out because of Ed Mav-

aradian, if that's what you're referring to."

"It's not and you know it. It seems to make you happy when one of us gets shot up or killed. Any one of us. It doesn't matter to you."

"That's not so. It doesn't seem personal, that's all," said Dover. "Besides, I'm not soft. You know that."

"I know," said Parks. "I have to admit you're not soft. It's the one thing that's kept you on the force. In spite of yourself you do get results, sometimes."

Dover went out and started the car and cruised. He felt good. Ed Mavaradian was out of his way. Ed hadn't been competition but it didn't hurt to have a clear field. Besides, Mavaradian was a cop, and this was reason enough. Dover was careful with what he said, particularly to other cops, and sometimes with Laura, but with himself there was no need to conceal what he felt. A dead cop, a coffin, and five hundred dollars was worth a burial in the best cemetery in town. No more.

Dover didn't like the small time crooks and runny nose junkies and pushers he usually picked up. They were disgusting too and weren't even tough physically, no fight in them. What they were wasn't much but at least they knew it. Big men in the syndicate were different, and he almost admired them. He couldn't touch them and no cop in town could. The syndicate knew what it wanted and picked men who could deliver. That was honesty.

But cops—it amused Dover. He was one of them and had a badge to prove it, but he would rather not. If there were some other way to earn the sort of living he was accutomed to he would have taken it long ago.

Dover saw a service station and stopped and went to a phone. The line was busy but he finally got through. "Laura?" he said, knowing from her voice that he didn't have to ask the next question. "I hope I'm not the first to tell you."

"No. I've heard."

"I'm sorry. I wish it hadn't happened."

"Are you really sorry?"

"I was on vacation. I cut it short as soon as I heard and came back to go after them."

"You didn't like Ed."

"I guess I didn't. He went with you until I came along."

"You wouldn't have liked him if I had never gone with him."

"Perhaps not. But he was on the force too and I worked with him."

"I shouldn't think that would make any difference to you."

"Laura," he said, leaning close to the phone, "I don't know where you got the idea that I hate cops. Ed gave it to you or someone else. No, let me finish. It's true I don't like a person merely because he's a policeman and I'm one too. But I do have a decent normal respect

for the people I work with. Can you get that into your head?"

"I want to believe you, for your sake as well as mine. You know I still like Ed a lot."

"I'm glad that's all it was, that you liked him, nothing more."

"You know that's what it was. It could have been something else, but then you came along."

"Lucky for both of us I did. You'd be a widow."

"I don't know. Maybe that would have been better. I could trust Ed. I'm not sure about you, never."

"You'll get over that," he said. "Look, don't break up over him. I'm going after the kids who killed him."

"I'm not breaking up," she said. "Please be careful."

"I'm not brave like Ed was. I'm always careful," he said. "I'll come over and see you when I get done with this, whenever that is."

Dover got in the car and continued cruising. It would be good if he could find them. Not great, just good. Cop killers didn't rate high except with other cops. The public went for juicier items, a beautiful model raped and strangled, a playboy shot in a fit of blind anger by an outraged husband who had just incidentally bought a gun the day before and had spent eight hours practicing on a pistol range. But cops didn't rate much and everybody knew it except cops themselves.

So there wouldn't be much in it if he found the killers. Not that there was much of a chance he would. Too many others were looking. Besides, these sort of characters were probably holed up at home drinking their old man's beer and watching television. When it got safer they'd come out, but not until then.

He could figure them pretty well, cop hating kids fast with a switchblade—and slow on guts. He didn't sympathize with them — Dover didn't sympathize with anyone stupid enough to get caught in a jam —but he did share part of what they thought and he could stretch this similarity in thinking a long way.

Exactly what had they done after knifing Mavaradian? Well, Ed had been cut up a lot so there was blood on the kids too. They went home and changed into other jeans, shoes, the whole outfit. Then they disposed of what they had been wearing. It wasn't difficult.

The simplest way was to wash and dry everything they'd worn. They could go to a laundromat but it was a good bet one of their families had a washer-dryer so they washed at home. After that they'd tear the clothing into rags and wipe the rags along the underside of the car. If that wasn't enough they'd drain crankcase oil from the car and soak the rags in the oil. This would leave too many rags to explain so if the trash disposal truck didn't come by that day they'd go

to a district it did pick up, stuffing the rags in the first trash can they saw. This took care of their clothing but they still had switchblades.

Nothing to the knives either. If they didn't have a torch in their old man's workshop they'd go to a garage that specialized in hot rods and hang around until someone put down a torch. They'd use that to melt the knives into something unrecognizable, at least unidentifiable.

This shot nearly everything. It was no crime not to have a switchblade, though if he knew anything about it kids that were capable of knifing a cop were apt to have spares saved for just such an emergency.

George Dover rode and thought. He could figure them out but there wasn't much incentive in it for him. Killing a cop meant nothing to him. In finishing off Mavaradian they'd actually done him a favor, if he wanted to look at it that way. It didn't matter, that's all, Mavaradian, or any other cop. Besides, there wasn't much of a chance he'd find them. Too many delinquents, and they were all alike.

Still he was supposed to be working on it so he drove to the old man's house because it was something. The jeanagers were out. Nervous, but they were out as usual. Some had been picked up and let go and were circulating again. Those who hadn't been touched knew what was going on. Dover passed twenty or thirty. Not many singles tonight, and no large groups either. No one would be throwing a ball tonight, until this died down. Dover grinned; he knew how they felt. They'd hate him if they guessed he was a cop. But they didn't find out; he wasn't driving a squad car and he was careful not to turn on the police radio.

Nothing at the old man's house, not even teenagers. They stayed away from this area. He circled the block a few times and when no one showed that he might think of stopping to question he drove away.

And then, after possibly an hour of aimless driving and looking, there they were—both of them.

These two weren't any different from the rest except that they were in a group that was larger than usual for the evening, five. Dover couldn't put his finger on why he was interested in two and not the other three—but he was. He didn't argue with himself. He was going to talk with them but he wasn't in a hurry. Sliding the car into a parking space ahead of them he watched the group come toward him. Of the two one was taller than Dover but thinner; the other a good four inches shorter but as heavy. A chunky kid, but he wasn't all fat.

They were average, normal delinquents, hardly a thing to distinguish them from the other three. Possibly they were a little more scared, and certainly they did suck

in their guts and slouch their shoulders a bit jauntier. It was what he'd expect of them if they had killed a cop. It gave him ideas.

As they passed the car chunky gut was on the outside and Dover looked him over. A hell of a lot of blubber but not more than seventeen. He could be rough to handle in the right situation but he wasn't as good as he thought he was. None of them were.

Pretending not to notice Dover they sauntered on by. He knew what they were thinking. They wanted to yank him out of the car and see how long it would take to beat him into insensibility. They might not be aware of it but all five of them couldn't do it. They'd have to have years of practice before he'd need to watch out for them. Their attitude amused Dover.

And yet, once they'd gone by, in spite of what they considered their toughness, they knew something was out of place. They didn't necessarily think he was a cop but they were pretty sure they'd made a mistake in banding together. They went on up the street and as casually as they could, peeled off. At the first street one turned off and at the next two others went, leaving the two alone that Dover was interested in.

Maybe this just happened but Dover didn't think so. If the two were hot, the others would be aware of it and wouldn't care to be picked up with them. Certainly they'd scattered fast and it meant something. Dover started the car and drove after the two who were far down the street. He got ahead of them, turned down a side street, made a U turn in the middle of the block, and was in the second line of cars when they crossed the intersection. They didn't see him but he got a glimpse of the tall kid. He was about nineteen, maybe twenty.

No question of it; they were nervous, jittery, and not merely because cops were out. It wasn't much to go on, except with these creeps Dover was almost certain he knew why they were spooked. The clothing they'd worn had been destroyed and couldn't incriminate them. Their knives couldn't be found or traced. From what he'd seen they weren't marked or scratched so that no lab analysis could connect them either to the old man or Mavaradian. But one thing, if they had it, they hadn't disposed of. They couldn't hide it on or near either of their houses; they wouldn't burn it or throw it away; they were in a hell of a bind to know what they could do with it.

The money they'd stolen from the old man. Ten thousand was found in the old man's house. There may have been a lot more. If so these kids had it. How much they had was problematical. It might be thousands if they'd had time to look, perhaps only a few hundred if Mavaradian had inter-

rupted their search in the beginning. Whatever the amount it meant a lot to these kids or they wouldn't have kept it this long when they knew every cop in town was looking for them.

Dover's interest was aroused. Money meant something to him too. It would link them better than anything else to Mavaradian's death but he wasn't thinking of this. It entered his mind, but only briefly.

He could pick them up now. If they had the money they'd make a break for it and he'd have to shoot one or both of them. At the station a confession could be beaten out of them. He didn't like this angle. That they might, probably had, killed Mavaradian did not concern him.

The best approach was to give them a little room. If that didn't do it, well, he should be able to think of something else.

Driving some distance ahead he parked and walked back toward the youths. He looked in a store window until they came even with him and then he followed them, making no attempt to conceal that he was tailing. At first they were silent but then they thought they ought to talk so they began chattering wildly. The tall older one was called Ford, either because that was his name or because he stole that make. The chubby one had two names, Vic sometimes, but mostly Butter-Ball. This was as much as he could get out of them listening so when they reached the car he stopped and got in, pretending he didn't think they were worth bothering with. After that he kept them in sight though he was pretty sure they didn't know he was following.

They were disappointing. Either they were smarter than he thought, and guessed that he was lying back even if they couldn't see him, or they didn't have the money to get rid of. That, or maybe they were trying to prove to each other how much pressure they could take. They didn't seem to be going anywhere. They were wandering, no more than that. Dover became impatient. With money involved he wasn't going to let them take all night.

Lessening the distance between them, just before they reached an intersection he switched on the police band and turned the corner in front of them, stalling the car directly in their path.

It bugged them. There was an announcement that the murderers of policeman Mavaradian hadn't been apprehended and that all officers were ordered to concentrate on finding the killers. The two stood on the sidewalk waiting for Dover to move the car and he didn't. He let them fill their ears and when he finally got out of their way they were no longer stalling.

They didn't split as he feared. They headed toward a shabby residential area that bordered a manu-

facturing district. He knew the section and interposed the car. He didn't want to lose them among the factories. After that he was more careful and pushed them. It was skillful use of the car, forcing them to run without actually letting them go where they wanted to. Gradually he increased the pressure. They were rugged to take it without cracking.

They didn't give up easily but since there was money in it neither did he. He kept moving them away from the factories toward the edge of the city. He was squeezing them and they knew it. They had very little choice of where they could go but they tried to evade him. Twisting and dodging among the streets did them no good; finally they came to a dirt road at the end of which was an open field and beyond that, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, a state highway. They were cornered without possibility of escape and if they didn't know it he was going to have to show them.

However it wasn't necessary. His luck held; midway down the dirt road they turned off it onto a railroad spur that he had almost forgotten about. It was the last chance they had but they'd made good. He watched them start down the track and when they were well on it he reversed the car to the corner and cut around so that he would be where they came out on the next street. With lights and engine off he coasted up to the track and got out and waited.

He didn't see them immediately and for a moment thought they'd slipped away. Presently he saw them, two dim figures crouched at the edge of the track. As he watched they stood up and continued toward him. He let them reach the street and walk thirty feet before calling out for them to stop.

"What do you want, daddio?" said Butter-Ball when he got close.

He snapped a flashlight on their faces. Butter-Ball had fine even teeth and skin that girls would envy. Ford had the more elaborate hair arrangement. They blinked at him, apparently unconcerned. "I've been following you," he said.

"Have you? See anything you didn't like?" said Ford.

"Not tonight. Where were you last night?"

"Home watching the fight."

"There was no fight on television last night."

"I didn't say anything about TV. Daddio and momio."

"Let's go over last night again. Where were you?"

"Home, watching TV."

"All night?"

"Yes."

"At three in the morning?"

"Oh my no," said Butter-Ball in a high dainty voice. "We were safe in bed long before that."

Dover chopped a right to his belly and when Butter-Ball doubled over Dover brought the butt of the

flashlight down on his kidneys, sending him sprawling into Ford. "I'll let you know when I want you to talk to me," he said.

"You a cop?" said Ford. He saw Dover's right swing and ducked it but didn't anticipate the heel that Dover brought down on his instep. Before he could squeal Dover rammed his forearm across Ford's throat. A strangled gasp came out but it wasn't loud.

"Yes, I'm a cop. Do you think I am?" said Dover.

"Never doubted it," said Butter-Ball. Ford couldn't speak but he grunted.

"Then we agree," said Dover. "Move down to the street light."

When they got there he faced them against the pole and went over them. They had money, not too much for their age, no identification, and each had the usual switchblade.

"You just buy these?" he said, holding the knives for them to see.

"Had mine about a year," said Butter-Ball.

"You?"

"Longer. Almost two years." Ford's voice was scratchy, barely audible.

"Carry them all the time?"

"Once in a while," said Butter-Ball. "Anything wrong with that?"

"They don't look as old as you say they are. Too shiny."

"I said we don't often carry them."

"But tonight you just happened to put them in your pockets?"

"Sure. You going to arrest us for that?"

He could, and wondered if he should. Switchblades were illegal, particularly this type. No other charges, just this, and it would put them away for at least a few days.

But there were drawbacks. His name would go down as the arresting officer. If these two creeps were determined they could trace him through this. But worse were the other cops. They were thinking of Mavaradian and they'd be in a beating mood. If he took Ford and Butter-Ball in they might get too enthusiastic and beat a confession out of them. He didn't see why he should help them. Mavaradian was not his business. Let the other cops be as smart as he was if it meant that much to them.

And there was more. He'd have to put down where he made the arrest. This would be on the record. If a confession were beaten out a search would be made of the area and when nothing was found it wouldn't look good for him. He'd be investigated and—hell— it wasn't safe to take the JD's in, as much as he wanted.

He snapped the blades open and looked at the punks. "Isn't this the way you handed them to me?"

Ford and Butter-Ball looked at each other questioningly. "Yeah," said Butter-Ball.

"That's what I thought," he said. "I'm giving them back the same

way." He threw the knives at them.

Ford caught his by the handle. Butter-Ball slapped his out of the air, nicking his finger but not badly. A small spot of blood showed, but no more than that. Butter-Ball picked the knife off the ground and the two stood there, glancing at each other and then staring at him.

Doover loosened his coat near his gun. "Close the blades," he said.

Their eyes flickered but they closed the knives, pocketing them.

"You can go," said Dover. "Get the hell out of here."

"We'll never forget your kindness," said Butter-Ball.

"Don't crap," said Dover. "I'm going to my car. I'll wait five minutes. After that I'll drive around. If I see either of you I'll take you to the station."

"Maybe we won't have the knives," said Butter-Ball. "What can you charge us with?"

"If I find you without knives you'll wish you'd kept them," said Dover. "Do you get that?"

"We dig you, daddio," said Ford.

He gave them a little longer than five minutes and then drove a few blocks but they weren't in sight. A few more minutes and he was satisfied they had gone. It didn't hurt to be sure, and he was sure. Driving back to where he had originally parked he got out and went up the railroad spur.

He stopped where he thought they'd been kneeling when he saw them from the street. A culvert; he flashed a light inside. Dirt and undisturbed leaves. They were cool enough, but not professional. They'd leave traces if they had buried money.

Next were cans at the side of the track. Upon inspection they were empty. The money was somewhere. He knew it. He got down on his knees and felt along the track. A loose tie, but nothing underneath it. They weren't that stupid. It was a spur track, not used much, but even so a tie as loose as this was due for replacement. They wouldn't risk having the money found that easily.

Of course he might be wrong. Maybe they hadn't found any money; they weren't necessarily the ones that had killed Mavaradian and stomped the old man. Maybe—but he didn't believe it. They were the same kids all right. When he first saw them they'd had the money. They'd hidden it here and came out to meet him. That's why they were so sure of themselves when he stopped them. They knew he wouldn't find anything on them.

It was possible they hadn't hidden it here at all. They might have tossed it in any one of a hundred yards they'd passed, or even into the gutter on the street, anything just to get rid of it.

He went back over the ground he'd covered. Still not in the culvert, nor lying loose beside the tracks, nor yet in cans. But there were beer bottles, dark brown glass

he hadn't looked into. He broke three before he found anything and then it wasn't as much as he expected, a handful of tens and twenties rolled into tubes and stuffed into the bottle. It wasn't much, a few hundred dollars, but it was a fine beginning. There were other bottles.

He broke all he could find and the final take was sizable. He estimated it with concentrated satisfaction. A lot of entertaining with this, take Laura out more than a few times, a suit made by a really good tailor. He could have passed it by; he might have picked up the kids while they had the money on them.

He wadded the money tightly, intent on how much he had found, and got up. In so doing he avoided a knife in his side. He took the blade instead in his shoulder and the force of the blow and the pain threw him off balance onto a knife on the other side. The edge sliced along his ribs and ripped but didn't enter. He grabbed for his gun and felt it in his hand but then his stomach became wet and weak and he couldn't raise his arm. He lowered his head and butted, connecting with a solid body but before he could do much damage the back of his neck exploded and he fell down.

He lay on his stomach, knowing they were stabbing him repeatedly. He didn't feel it. He couldn't see them but he didn't have to know who they were. He couldn't focus on them even when they rolled him over and wrenched the money from his hand. Released of what it clutched his hand twitched toward his gun. A heel smashed into his face and thereafter he didn't move, unconscious until nearly dawn.

When he next saw anything it was an officer in uniform. Someone he knew, probably, but couldn't remember.

"Easy now," said the policeman bending over him. "The ambulance is coming. Lie quietly."

It was too late for an ambulance. It wouldn't do him any good. "Ford," he muttered. He tried to tell the cop who to look for but that was as much as he could say. His face was badly cut and had stiffened. He was cut all over.

"Don't worry about the car," said the policeman. "I saw it parked on the street, which is why I happened to look around. If I hadn't recognized that it was yours you might have been here for hours."

His lungs were bloodfilled; his breathing soggy. They'd sliced him.

"Cop killers," he whispered. It was the last thing he said.

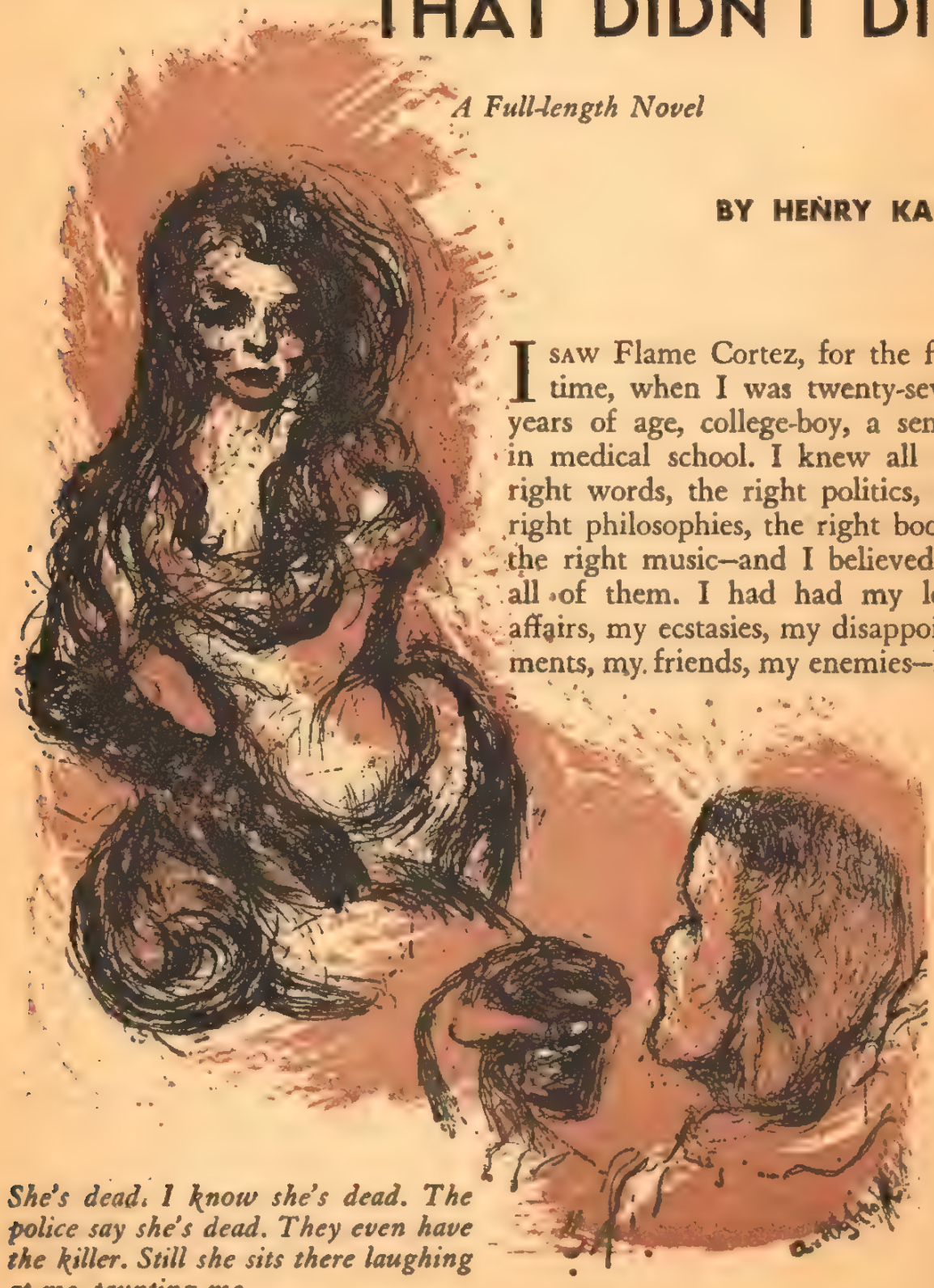
"I thought so. Same ones that got Mavaradian," said the policeman. "Don't worry. We'll take them apart for both of you when we find them."

Dover felt lousy, dying.

A CORPSE THAT DIDN'T DIE

A Full-length Novel

BY HENRY KANE



I SAW Flame Cortez, for the first time, when I was twenty-seven years of age, college-boy, a senior in medical school. I knew all the right words, the right politics, the right philosophies, the right books, the right music—and I believed in all of them. I had had my love affairs, my ecstasies, my disappointments, my friends, my enemies—but

She's dead. I know she's dead. The police say she's dead. They even have the killer. Still she sits there laughing at me, taunting me.

in total I had nothing—I was footloose and fancy-free; I was unattached, seeking, searching, hoping.

I was driving across the bridge on a misty spring evening, from New Jersey to New York, with my passenger, Dora Mason, whom I had known all my life. It was Saturday night, during a weekend off from school. We were on our way to dig music, far out, avant-garde, the best—the Bill Floyd Trio. I was driving across the bridge, we had just touched New York territory, when Dora said, "You looking forward, pal?"

"Busting wide open," I said, "only I thought the guy was in San Francisco."

"He's in New York."

"So why didn't you tell me?"

"You haven't been around."

Bill Floyd had cut one album. It was a knocker-upper. I had worn out the grooves at school, and I had worn out the grooves of another album at home; and I had a new set of records, for school and for home. Dora Mason had introduced me to the man's music — Dora Mason was an aficionado of the far-out stuff.

"There's another attraction and this one is to look at," Dora Mason said.

"I've got my own stuff to look at, sweetie," I said.

"Her name is Flame Cortez."

It was a cellar-club called *The Hotsy* on Fifty-second near Eighth. We could not find any parking place nearby and most of the parking lots were full up. We finally parked way over on the east side, and walked back. It was a warm night with wisps of fog. New York had a lid on: the sounds of the city were subdued, the lights pale and puffy in their circles of haze.

The Hotsy was a cellar-club with a canopy. We by-passed the large come-on of a life-size picture, in color, of a scantily-dressed dancing girl in veils, descended ten steps and entered into a large, dim, smoky, uncrowded room with a low ceiling. The maitre d' spread his mouth in an indiscriminate smile and led us to a front table, seated us, waved a hand for a waiter. "Business," he said, "is beginning to pick up." We ordered one champagne and one scotch and soda.

It was an oblong room. The tables were large and square with black formica tops and solid chairs. The walls were papered green, wall brackets casting amber light toward a green ceiling. The far end of the oblong was covered with black velvet draperies. Set before that were two small platforms. The one on the left was empty. The one on the right had the music: piano, drums and bass. Oh, they were good. They were hot. They were mighty. They did music that pulsated, that wailed, that whispered, that cried, that smiled, that laughed, that climbed, that clambered, that smote — wild, soft, loud, muted, happy, grieving—

oh, cascade of sound, abandon of rhythm, music as it was meant, man and instrument one, the combination whole, crowding into you, entering into you, mixing with your blood. This was music.

"The one at the piano is Bill Floyd," Dora Mason said, "and most of the music is his own, plus he's the arranger. He's it."

"Great man."

"How do you like the white locks?"

"Kills me."

He was handsome: loose, lean, carefree, tired, musical. His face was long and pale and thin with good bones and soft brown shining eyes like a woman's. He was a creature of the night and it showed in his pallor, in the dark rings beneath his eyes and the wet-purple shine of the lids. The white hair was startling. He was young; he was no more than thirty, and the white hair was young too, and springy, cut close and fitting about his head in tight ringlets. And just then he looked up and saw me studying him, and noticed Dora, and raised a hand in recognition. Dora waved back.

And now the music flattened, and I looked at Dora, and Dora winked. The lights in the wall brackets went off, one by one, and a red spot played on the empty platform to our left. A metallic voice over a microphone said simply:

"Ladies and gentlemen—Flame Cortez."

The music boiled up, and there she was. The black drapes parted for her, and the drum went to work, and there she was, boldly shaped, tall and perfect, whirling in red veils on the small dais, whirling under the red spot, wild whirling in a reckless dance, the music going crazy—and I with it.

She hit me hard.

And she knew it.

The moment the drapes had parted, she had hit me, and she had known it, right then. She had stood there for the fragment of a second, and our eyes had met, and held, and there had been impact, like a kiss: close, intimate, physical, real. And then she was whirling in her dance, and when it was over, and she took her bow, she stared down at me with the widest blackest eyes I had ever seen, and she smiled, and then she was gone.

The music ended.

The musicians shoved away from their instruments.

Bill Floyd rose from his piano, rubbing circulation into his hands, stretched, and he came toward us, moving gracefully, casual and slender.

"Good evening, Miss Mason," he said.

"Good evening to you, Bill Floyd," Dora said. "Please, join us, won't you?"

"Thank you kindly. Don't mind if I do." He had a soft melted-sugar

voice, the words running together; there was no click to the consonants.

"Don Reed," Dora said. "Bill Floyd."

"How do?" he said.

"Won't you have a drink, Mr. Floyd?" Dora said.

"Gin and tonic. Double gin and tonic, please."

The waiter nodded and went away.

Dora said, "Is that a tinge of the South I detect in your voice?"

"Yep," he said. "Tinge, I expect. Born in Louisiana, but I've spent most of my life on the West Coast."

Then the black drapes opened again.

And the black drapes fell closed.

Bill Floyd did not turn. His eyes were on me, soft-brown, the sockets deep in the tired face. The eyes blinked rapidly, amusedly, cynically, and one eyebrow quivered as it moved up.

"Exquisite," he said. "Isn't she?"

"I didn't know it showed."

"Always shows. Like magic. People turn to glass. Like a mirror. They reflect her."

Easy-talking Bill Floyd, the melted-sugar words running together, the soft eyes innocent now, amused but innocent, the voice a casual purr.

Then why did my back ridge?

Why did I hear a warning?

I shook it off. I fixed to answer in banter, but she was upon us now, and Bill Floyd was up out of his chair, familiarly touching her arm, saying, "Flame Cortez. You know Miss Mason. This is Don Reed."

I rose and she gave me her hand and her eyes roved over me, head to toe and back. "Very pleased to know you," she said.

She was tall, her curves exaggerated by a tiny waist. She wore a tight coral silk gown that was a shimmering embrace to her figure. The neck of the gown was scooped wide and low exposing breast and shoulder. Her flesh was tan-gold and indescribably smooth. Flame Cortez. Ridiculous name, but a genius must have named her. It was perfect for the casual arrogance, the confident gleaming smile, the nonchalant assurance. It was perfect for the imperious set of her head, the erect bearing, the tan-gold oval-shaped face, the thick black hair hanging in a shining mass over one shoulder, the straight nose with out-thrust nostrils, the smouldering black eyes, the audacious red-wet mouth.

"Please have a drink with us," Dora said. "Won't you, Miss Cortez?"

"Try and stop me," said Miss Cortez.

"Subtle," said Bill Floyd. "Like a house falling in."

He held a chair for her, and she was seated, and Bill and I pulled up our chairs, and then Flame reached across and tapped a long fingernail at Dora's glass.

"Champagne, I hope," she said.

"Champagne," Dora said.

"That's for me too. Let's have champagne, lots of it."

I switched from Scotch and we had champagne, lots of it, and I silently thanked my father for the liberal allowance he had bestowed upon me. And then Bill Floyd flipped a look at his wrist watch and said, "Gotta go make music now. Excuse me, fellas."

And then Dora said, "I'm next. Got to get up in the morning. Got a newspaper to run."

"You're going to leave Donny-boy, I hope," Flame said.

"I've every intention of leaving Donny-boy."

"Yes. I'll see you, Dora."

And then we were alone, Flame Cortez and Don Reed.

She had a deep voice, husky; it was a shade above a whisper; it was as though, always, she were telling you a secret, taking you into her confidence, saying something that was only for you, especially for you, and for no one else.

"You're an educated guy, aren't you?"

"Somewhat," I said.

"I love an educated guy. I've got respect for an educated guy. What do you do, Donny?"

"I go to school."

"School?" The wide eyes widened.

"Med school. I get out in three months, in June."

"You mean all finished, a doctor?"

"Yes, all finished, a doctor."

"Well, I can't say you're the doctor type."

She turned, gazed about the room, turned back to me. "I'm hungry. Maybe we can blow this trap. Go somewhere and eat."

We left the *Hotsy and* walked. We walked and we talked . . . and we talked. We talked about everything—the little hick town I came from, her Spanish mother and Italian father whom she had lost somewhere in California. We stopped at a hamburger joint and had ham and eggs and coffee and more talk. Hour after hour we filled each other in on the details of our lives. Breathlessly she poured out the sordid minutes of a stripper's life and finally she said, "You think I'm bad, doctor?"

"I wouldn't know."

"I'm worse."

"Oh, now stop . . ."

"I'm rotten." She smiled around her cigarettes. "Don't ever say I didn't warn you. First and last time I say it. To you. Rotten. Period. Now, you take it from there."

I didn't say anything because there wasn't anything to say. I could have denied her remark 'till I was blue in the face but it didn't seem important. I didn't care what she had been—she was what she was at this moment and I liked her. I lit a cigarette and looked out the window.

She was watching me and she

laughed softly and patted my hand.

"Where are you living?" I asked her.

"The Lane."

"Where's that?"

"Fifty-fourth and Broadway. Near the *Hotsy.*"

"Look, I've got my car here. We can pick it up and drive somewhere."

"Rain-check, Donny-boy. You can take me home now, but you can't come in, room's a mess."

Later, when we got to her address and we were standing outside her door she said, "If you want to kiss me, Donny . . ."

And then she said, "Kiss me more, hard, hold me . . ."

And then she said, ever so softly, her lips warm, at my ear, tremulously, gently, sweetly, "Come in."

College boy meets dancing girl in honky-tonk: there you have the classic proposition for a sum total of nothing. But it did not happen that way. College boy got caught, entwined, enmeshed and tied up into knots. College boy was enthralled, fascinated, captivated, enraptured, and progressively more bewitched. College boy was stirred to his depths; for the first time in his life he was completely out of control, happily, dizzily, preposterously lost. College boy was stupidly and hopelessly in love.

One night I asked her, "Honey, why don't we get married?"

"You out of your mind?" she said.

"Yes I am—for you."

She made a sound like a giggle. "You know," she said, "it's a temptation."

"Fine. Don't resist it."

"I don't mean to marry *you,* Donny, I don't mean *you* for the temptation."

"Who the hell else?"

"I mean marrying, period. I'm tired of the rat race. Only I can't live without money, baby."

"OK. I've figured it out."

"Sure. You're always figuring *something* out."

"I'll be graduating in June."

"Big deal."

"One of the interns at the hospital in Spring Echo leaves in October. That job's been arranged for me."

"So?"

"I've got about five thousand bucks in the bank."

"Five thousand dollars. Big deal. A real millionaire. Just what I'm looking for."

"Please listen to me, Flame. We get married in June, we vacation during the summer, then we move into my father's house."

"And then we live on your intern's pay, is that it?" No good, Donny."

"Why not? Why?"

"I could go through your five thousand just on our vacation."

"I don't care."

"No good. Don't you see?"

"No, I don't see."

And then there was the night when I sat at my special little reserved table at *The Hotsy,* and I watched her performance, jealous of the other watchers, and afterward she came to me, tan-gold Flame Cortez, smiling but detached, and she said, "Don't wait, Donny. I've got a date, and I've been excused from the next show, so please don't wait, it's business, kind of, an important person . . ."

But I waited, for nothing, for no reason, nibbling Scotch and soda, and then Bill Floyd loitered by, loose and casual, and he sat near me, and he said, "Buy you a drink, Doctor?"

"No, thanks."

"I hear you want to get married."

"Everybody's got a big mouth, hasn't everybody?"

"She told me in confidence."

"I don't care if she didn't tell it to you in confidence. There's no secret."

"Want advice?"

"From you?"

"Yes."

"No."

"Don't," he said. "That's the advice."

"Why not, pal? You got an axe to grind?"

"No axe, Doctor. It's just I want to be kind to you."

"Thanks for the advice. Nice of you to be kind. Now do me a favor and go play your piano."

He put a finger into his drink and stirred the ice. His eyes watched the ice go round, did not lift from the glass. "I see you sitting around, night after night, like a chump with his tongue hanging out, and I kind of get sorry for you. You're really a nice fella. You've had a little fun. So okay, you've had a little fun. Now skip the whole bit. Lose it. Forget it. You never had better advice."

"Thanks large, Mr. Floyd. For nothing."

"That's it," he said. "And if you want a trump on that, you got it. I turned her down when she asked me."

"*She* asked *you?*"

"More than once, little pal."

"You're a liar."

"You got a right to your opinion, Doctor, but that's the way it is. Been like that for a long long time. Me and Flame"—he crossed his fingers and held them out—"like that. I suppose in my own weird way—I'm a cuke, Doc—in my own way I suppose I'm crazy-mad for that chick. And let me tell you now, I ain't never letting up. Never." His lips hinged and he smiled his mirthless smile. "I let her run loose because that's the only way to hold her – but, Doc, you got to be a certain type to hold still for stuff like that there. You the type, Doc?"

"Liar."

"I'd even let her get married—but we'd still be like that." The crossed fingers were under my nose. His eyes remained expressionless

but a nerve twitched in his temple and there was a tight white ring around his mouth.

"You're a liar," I said.

"Keep repeating it, Doc. Maybe you'll believe it."

"I'll ask her. How do you like that? I'll ask her."

"Ask her. I got no objection." The fingers uncrossed. He drank his drink rapidly, as though he were parched.

"You think she'll tell me?" I said.

"She might. She might not. Whatever suits her. She might tell you the whole bit, entire—or she might say I'm the goddamndest liar that ever lived. You want to know something?" He shook his head. "I don't care."

For a while things progressed from bad to worse. Flame was busy all the time with "important people" and when I did see her we always ended up arguing. Then in the late summer my father died unexpectedly, leaving an estate of sixty-thousand dollars.

The first I saw of Flame Cortez after the death of my father, I had called her from Jersey, told her I was coming and asked her to meet me in the lobby, which she did.

"I was sorry to hear about your father," she said.

"Yes," I said.

We went out to the claptrap of the sun-heated asphalt. We turned north on Seventh Avenue in the blare of automobile horns.

"Hot," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"We going anywhere special?"

"The park," I said.

We went to the zoo. We bought popcorn and chewed.

"We're going to get married," I said as we looked at snakes.

We bought hot dogs with sauerkraut heavy on the mustard. We chewed and looked at tigers. We bought soda pop with straws and sucked as we watched seals dive. We strolled in dappled sunshine. Flame bought a balloon. "There'll be money," I said as we looked at polar bears. "More than sixty thousand dollars, they tell me, after taxes. Plus the five gees I've got in the bank, my own, in my checking account. Plus the house is mine. We'll get married."

"Now what about Bill Floyd?" I said.

"Bill Floyd?"

"Let's settle that."

"Settle Bill Floyd? Now there's a job for somebody." She giggled. Her knees rubbed against me.

"We're getting married," I said. "He's out."

"Who ever said he was in?"

"Only everybody."

"Only everybody — means nobody."

"All right. He said so himself."

She sat up. "Said so himself, did he?"

"Said you and he"—I crossed my fingers—"were like that, from way back. Made it sound like some kind

of unholy alliance contracted in hell. Said he lets you play, but he's in, and he stays in, from now until the fall-out gets us. Said you practically plead to become his bride but he's not buying."

"You lie in your goddamned teeth."

"Me or Bill Floyd?"

"You, if you're making it up. Him, if that's what he really told you."

We were married when I was graduated, in June. There had been no problems about the estate. I had signed all the necessary papers, executed all the necessary bonds, completed all the lawyer-stuff rigmarole. There were sixty-two thousand dollars in cash, and the house; and a job waiting for me at the Spring Echo Hospital, commencement date October first. We planned a delayed honeymoon, we would go to Europe for two months, August and September.

We were packing for our trip, when she discovered the gun. "What's this?"

"What's what?" I said.

"This," she said. Her hand came out with a bright-shining revolver, a .38. She held it quite competently.

"Pack it," I said.

"What's with guns?" she said.

"Just be careful with it, baby. It's fully loaded and deadly."

"Don't worry about me with guns. I know all about guns."

"So pack it," I said.

We flew across, arranged to return by ship. We spent two weeks in London, two weeks in Paris, and a month in Rome and environs. No man ever had a better honeymoon. She was different, not at all the girl I had known in *The Hotsy*. She was calm and quiet, eager but shy, passionately interested, avidly curious and infinitely patient, both in our sightseeing escapades and our hymeneal bed.

Then subtly, her mood changed. She seemed excited, expectant about going home. Her patience with me grew wispy and fitful, flickering, spasmodic: fleeting but unmistakable boredom was infecting her. She disappeared for long periods, ostensibly shopping, but returned without purchases, teetering like a breeze-pecked poplar, complaining, "The chianti in Italy okay, but, brother, does the champagne stink." She rejected my embraces, or was excruciatingly passive; the old contempt stared out of cold suddenly-slit eyes and her nostrils quivered as though I smelled bad. It was time to go home, time to go home. The honeymoon, assuredly, was over. Perhaps we had been together too completely, too much alone. I was as happy as she to climb aboard the great graceful ship. On board, we would be closer to people, there would be the gushing propinquity of fellow-travelers, there would be camaraderie and conversation, there would be others

near to pique and pierce her ennui.

It was worse. She burst out of her shell and I crept into mine. She was the talk of the ship, the toast of the bar. Her extravagant beauty, burnished by the vacation-sun, had the men circling her orbit like limp and devoted satellites; the women turned their heads to look after her, whispering in communal clots. She had finally plucked out the fine clothes of her new wardrobe and swathed in Bikini at the pool or sheathed in silk at the ballroom, she was the focal point of attraction to both sexes, the women gracious and friendly and flattering, the men swirling about in charming libidinous eddies.

Outwardly courteous, reserved to the point of boorishness, inwardly I seethed with the unaccustomed madness of jealousy: my run for doom was snaring me into tortuous bypaths. I did not know of whom I was jealous; there were so many men; and so many opportunities; a transatlantic ship is like a labyrinth; frequently she was gone for hours on end; there were times when I went to bed without her. And there was no manner of recourse. When I questioned her she laughed at me, called me silly; I could not go about the ship, the deserted spouse with the hang-dog expression, querying of my merry fellow-voyagers: "Have you seen my wife? Please, where's my wife? Please, do you know where my wife is?"

My suspicion finally settled upon a regal Argentinian, a slender handsome gallant by name Pedo Simone. Originally he had introduced himself to *me*—perhaps that was the germ that created the initial misgivings – what allure could I have for a Pedro? And I, poor slob, in turn, introduced him to Flame. He had white teeth, and acquisitive black eyes, and long lashes, and a charming manner, and a lovely accent. He paid little attention to Flame—far too little. Pedro and I swam together, played checkers together, played shuffle-board together, basked in the sun together, but somehow when Flame was missing so was he.

The last night out, we had a formal dance. We were all slightly swacked, specially Pedro, more than slightly, which may have set him off his guard. He had taken possession of her; they had danced every dance. He was a graceful lissome dancer, which I was not. I ruminated at the bar, peeking in occasionally at the dance-floor. Flame was sensational in a stark white satin dress which clung like a terrified lover. It was sheer white nakedness and that is no figure of speech; I should know; I helped zip her into it as she wriggled deliciously; beneath the dress was a strapless bra and that was the sum total of her underclothing. They danced as one, Pedro and Flame, their bodies in full complement, close as conspirators, melding one to the other in a supple subtle lewd

intertwining. I returned to Scotch and soda, and more Scotch and soda, was joined by drunken cronies, was requested to join in watching private motion pictures, privately projected, in the privacy of a stateroom. I invaded the ballroom, invited my wife and was flatly refused, but piously. I went with my midnight cronies, watched obscene pictures, and was sickened. I sat, desperately clutching a drink, wedged between a lady and a gentleman, praying in the darkness for an end to the gauche flickering stupidities. At long last it was over, the lights came on, the ladies adjusted their dresses and snickered embarrassedly, the men grunted the usual heavy jokes. Everybody repaired to the bar, which had thinned out. The dance-floor had also thinned out.

Flame was gone. So was Pedro.

I sought through other public rooms, could not find her; went to our stateroom, she was not there; went back to the bar, she was not there; looked in again on the dancing people, she was not there. A queasy vague uneasy anticipatory thumping scattered inside of me. Muscles tightened in my stomach, my fingers twitched, a rising parched fury grew in my throat, like a tumor, impairing my breathing. I went out and tried to walk it off. It was a soft velvety night, a half moon in the heavens, myriad stars brilliantly adorning the pie of the sky. I walked the decks, walked stiffly marching, walked seeking resuscitation, walked in quiet gulping deep-breathing athletic despair, and then I found them, high up, tight together in a corner of the highest deck, the sea a white moon-illumined rushing swirl behind them; found them tight together in straining swaying embrace, his mouth wide open on hers, his clothes disarrayed, her arms around him, fingernails buried in the hair at the back of his head.

I pulled her off and hit her. She stumbled away. I hit him. He gasped but stood motionless. I tried again but missed as he moved aside. Before I recovered he came at me in a bull-rush, his head striking my chest, and I tumbled. He flung himself at me but I rolled out from under in time. I could see her as I rose, a moon-drenched partial silhouette, the knuckle of her index finger between her teeth, and I could hear her excited breathing. He scrambled up and he was at me again. He struck me but there was no power in his blows. His head was harder than his hands. Again he tried for the bull-rush but this time I side-stepped, flung a fist backhand, and it caught him at the ear, upsetting his balance. He fell. I heard a click. A knife gleamed in one soft hand and he was smiling. I retreated as he pushed to his feet. And now we were two ludicrous gladiators, arms wide-spread like snorting wrestlers, and we circled one another. He lunged, missed,

and I kicked him in the groin. He bent, breath expostulating. I kicked at the hand with the weapon: the knife fell to the deck with one echoless peremptory clang. And then I was upon him, all the madness in me exploding. He veered to the rail as I pummeled at him, chest, shoulders, jaw, head; his spine was flush with the rail when my fist, bloodless-clenched to a projectile of murder, struck, with all my strength, at his chin; he went over with exquisite terrifying grace, a back somersault, his body rigid as a board, his legs straight, his toes pointed. He fell into the sea with a modest splash, without outcry. I looked, panting, hanging over the rail, but he was gone, no sight of him, no thrashing about, nothing but the long narrow speeding moon-glowing turmoil of the backwash of the ship. I turned back to Flame—she was not there. I stumbled, departing; the flash of the knife-blade held me. I lifted it, gingerly, and dropped it overboard; it was engulfed without a sound. I ran my hands through my hair, fixed my clothes, went to the deserted bar for a double Scotch, returned, enwrapped in a dull dreamily dreamless dream, to my stateroom.

"Help me, for God's sake, won't you?" she said as I entered. "Where the hell have you been?" The zipper of the dress which she filled like skin was stuck. She grappled, her hands clawing behind her, said, "Damn! Please!" I twisted her around, pried at the catch, adjusted it, and the zipper descended with its prurient hum. She stepped out of the dress, stooped, retrieved it, tossed it to a chair. "Did you report it?" she said at the mirror.

"Report what?" I said.

"Now what the hell do you think what?" she said.

"Report what?" I said.

"Report what happened, what else?"

"Report what happened to whom?"

"Authorities," she said. "The captain. People like that."

"Did you report it?" I said.

"Your pleasure," she said.

"Whore," I said. "Dirty whore."

She slapped me. It was like a caress.

"He's dead," I said. "What can I report?"

"That he's dead, what else?"

"What good would it do?"

"Afraid, aren't you?" she said.

"Don't you care that he's dead?"

"Me? Care? Why should I care?"

"He was your friend, your—"

"A creep. A slimy creep. A guy's number is up, his number is up. Fate. Destiny. Why should I care? Guys have died before, I've been around when people have died."

"You're filth," I said.

"My dear darling husband," she said, "with all the qualities. A coward to the bargain too. Don't worry," she said, a short laugh like an obscenity in her throat, "I won't tell, I'll never tell, nobody will

know." And then the laugh came clear.

"Rotten," I said. "So rotten, aren't you?"

"Can't say I never told you, lover." And her body lifted against mine, warmly pressing, and I broke from her, and snapped off the lights.

We docked on a dry, busy, sun-drenched, windy afternoon—the first day of the last week of September—and after complaisant exposure of our belongings to the customs men we were gathered in by a gabbling Dora Mason effusing welcome. She led us to a glistening pink and white chariot, snapped open a door, said, "Brand new car, got a real deal on the trade-in. Get in, get in, don't just stand and look surprised."

Flame sat in front with her and I spread out alone in the rear. The car moved bumpless on the soft cushions of new springs, purring like a cat after cream. "You two look great, real great, sunburnt and all," Dora said. "How was the trip?"

"Real great," Flame said.

"Our handsome hero sulks as always," Dora said, an eye flicking to the rear view. "A serious mien becomes a doctor, but our boy kind of overdoes it, don't you think?"

"Um," Flame said.

"How did he behave?" Dora said.

"Real great," Flame said.

"Laconic," Dora said, "but as a remark from the bride about the bridegroom, I'd say, in essence, a compliment; succinct, but a compliment." Dora Mason had not stopped talking since she had greeted us. She was prattling out of sheer nervousness, and I tried to help out, but I had nothing to say, nothing would come. I sat in silence and moped and let Dora carry the ball. She talked about the weather, ships, Rome, the Spring Echo Hospital, the coming World Series, and then she said, "Oh, yes, the invitations were all duly sent out."

"What invitations?" I finally managed.

"The housewarming," Dora said.

"Whose housewarming?" I said.

"Yours," Dora said.

"What the deuce are you talking about?"

"What's the matter with *him?*" Dora said to Flame.

"I don't think I told him," Flame said.

"Damn right you didn't tell me," I said. "What's Dora got to do with what housewarming?"

"I sent out the invitations," Dora said, "as per request."

"You mean you two have been corresponding?" I said.

"Not actually corresponding," Flame said. "I sent Dora a list, and asked her to add whoever else from the town she thought belonged. The list had my people on it and a few of the people from the town I know about like the people from the hospital. I couldn't be sending

invitations from Europe, could I? That snazzy I'm not, yet."

"Well, couldn't it wait until we got back?"

"No, it wouldn't wait until we got back."

"Why the devil not?"

"Because next week you're going to work, or don't you remember? An intern in a hospital, he works days, he works nights, who knows? This week you're still free."

"It makes sense," Dora said. "I had cute little invitations printed. I'll show you some of the leftovers when we get home. I'll also show you the cute little bill, or which you will kindly reimburse me, plus postage."

"How come you didn't mention any of this to me?" I said to Flame.

"What was the sense to bother you?"

"You should have had Dora send *me* an invitation, while you were at it."

"Now, now, Doctor," Dora said. "You can't fault a wife who doesn't trouble her husband with every domestic detail." A forced specious flippancy trembled in her voice as she tried to get off the subject. "What is this, a sample of early domestic bliss? This kind of bickering is for the *ancient* married ones. Oh say, tell me about your first quarrel. I'm always curious about that. Generally, they're absolutely ridiculous."

"We haven't had our first quarrel," Flame said flatly.

"When is this housewarming?" I said.

"Tomorrow night," Flame said.

"Tomorrow night! Tomorrow's Monday. Since when is Monday a night for parties?"

"Bill Floyd is off on Monday nights", Dora said quickly, urgently, heartily, hastily continuing: "When that guy's off, the joint closes down. *The Hotsy*'s closed every Monday night."

"Bill Floyd is coming to *my* housewarming?" I said.

"You know, you sound a little crazy, dear husband," Flame said. "Bill Floyd is an old and dear friend. Of course he's coming to the housewarming. And he'd better show up. You did invite them all, I hope, Dora."

"The Bill Floyd Trio," Dora said tightly, and then with gaiety somewhat marred by slight falsetto: "And don't get so frumpy, Donny-boy. That kind of entertainment, for free—what's the complaint?"

I understood now why there had been no prior marital-chamber discussion about the housewarming. *Fait accompli* is *fait accompli*. If she would have disclosed the prospective guest list omitting Floyd, it would have been a patent fraud; if it had included Floyd, there would have been a monumental argument from which I would have emerged defeated and unhappily grumbling—certainly her reasons for inviting Floyd were sufficiently proper and cogent. *Fait accompli* is

fait accompli. Why discomfit the adoring husband with minor agitations during the connubial throes of his impeccable honeymoon?

Surprisingly—with one interruption which had nothing to do with any of the guests—the party turned out well. We had about sixty people carefully served and shepherded by a competent phalanx of Sarah and four assistants amiably supervised by the co-hostesses, Mrs. Reed and Miss Mason. The host was adequate; reserved, courteous, somewhat preoccupied, and in constant terror of an imminent explosion which never happened. Either the more raffish of Flame's friends were subdued by the frigid aura of the townspeople or the frigidity of the townspeople thawed in the ebullience of subdued raffishness: I was too nervous to notice. My wife, in an unexpected mood of caprice (or pure spite) was practically austere in a black prudent high-necked dress beneath which she was tightly brassiered and compactly girdled (two-way-stretched, to be precise); her make-up was demure, almost wan; her manner was remote, small-mouthed, small-smiled, completely the lady of the estate without laying it on too thick; she was fittingly distant to one Bill Floyd; more engaging to the other of her guests, though slightly imperious; and most attentive, without slobbering, to the most important of the company, Dr. Mark Shapiro, the head of the Spring Echo Hospital. Of course she kept me on a constant rack of tenterhooks by judiciously contrived, private, occasional, elaborate winks; or a sudden unexpected raising of the eyebrows; or a lewd moue from over the shoulder of Dr. Shapiro.

"Charming woman," he said once. "Utterly charming," he said, rotating his glass, making the ice spin in his drink. "It's going to be good to have you with us, Don." And he smiled. "I've been looking forward." He had known me since my bicycle-riding days and my roller-skating days and my horn-tooting days; he had been a friend of my father, encouraging the dream of a Dr. Donald Reed; he was forty years my senior, sixty-seven years of age, bald as an electric-bulb, bright-eyed, warm-hearted, paternal, and eternally antiseptic-smelling.

"No, more than I'm looking forward," I said dutifully.

"Wonderful music," he said. "Sort of modern jazz, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

The Bill Floyd Trio was doing right well by the Don Reed Housewarming. They played from the moment of their arrival, as trio, as duet, as solo performers; they urged the guests to sing, either alone or in chorus; they established the verve of the evening, created and carried the tempo; rotated as masters of ceremony; drank comparatively sparingly; remained comparatively sober. Floyd himself, the

flap of his mouth opening regularly to his gleaming meaningless smile, was obviously as taut as the skin of the trap-drum; he avoided me most of the evening; he appeared even to avoid Flame. He had greeted me when he had arrived, shortly, perfunctorily, the smile an effort, the handshake a touch of fingers; and once during the evening as he had lifted his glass and I was directly opposite him he had said, "Happy, happy."

The party had started early; eight o'clock (it was Monday); and by ten o'clock some of the people of the town were beginning to leave. Flame, Dora and I had just ushered out Dr. Shapiro (he had come alone, he was a widower) and had returned together to the snack table—a well-spiked drink for me, coffee for Dora, the munch of a sandwich for Flame—when Sarah came to us and said, "Mr. David Garson?"

"Who?" I said.

"David Garson."

"What about him?" I said.

"He just came," Sarah said.

I squinted at Flame. "Who's David Garson?"

"Never heard of him," Flame said.

"Garson?" I said to Dora.

Dora shrugged, swallowed a last gulp of coffee, said, "Let's go see."

A committee of three, we went to David Garson in the vestibule. He was a brown-faced man of about forty, with a thin pointed nose, brown bushy eyebrows over pale grey eyes, a jutting chin, and jaws like the side of a box. Feet apart he waited for us to come to him; he wore a lightweight raglan topcoat and he held a pork-pie hat in big-knuckled hands.

"Mr. Garson?" I said and my tongue moved in my mouth wetting the insides of my lips.

"Dr. Reed? Donald Reed?" He had a deep authoritative voice.

"Yes. What is it?"

"I should like to speak with you, doctor."

"Certainly. What about, Mr. Garson?"

He looked to Flame, to Dora.

"This is my wife, Mrs. Reed," I said, "and our good friend, Miss Mason. Now what is it, please, Mr. Garson?"

"It's about Pedro Simone, doctor."

Somehow, I had known it.

Quickly Flame said, "Pedro Simone? What about Pedro Simone?"

"I should like to talk with you too, if you please, Mrs. Reed."

"Look," I said, "if we're going to talk, this is no place to talk. Will you come with me, please? You too, Dora." Flame's glance at me was puckered, eyes blinking; but I turned from it. I wanted Dora; whatever it was, I wanted her to hear. "This way," I said and I led them to the study.

The room was small and it smelled of books. When I closed

the heavy door the sounds of the party were shut out. "All right," I said.

"May I?" Garson said. He removed his coat, folded it, placed it on a chair, placed his hat on top of it.

Flame sat in a corner of the couch; Dora in a wide leather chair. I remained standing. So did Garson.

"What about Pedro Simone," I said, "Mr. Garson?"

"I want to ask you to forgive me for coming so late," he said. "Barging in on your party."

A sensation of relief, like a waft of oxygen, permeated within me. If he was a cop, he was the most polite cop I had ever heard of. But I trod carefully, although more firmly. "Would you please state your business, Mr. Garson?"

"I'm from the Olympic Steamship Lines."

He was not a cop, but relief was tinged with apprehension. He could be the forerunner of cops. "Yes?" I said.

"About Pedro Simone," he said. "He didn't get off the ship today."

"What's that go to do with me?" I said.

"He's missing, Dr. Reed."

"So?"

"Completely missing. Clothes, baggage, intact. When something like that happens on a ship—"

"I still don't understand."

"Dr. Reed, Mr. Simone's cabin was locked from the outside. We had to break into it. The bed had not been slept in. He had not returned to his cabin the last night out. In such circumstances, when the man is missing..." He lifted his hands in the air.

"I still don't understand what any of this has to do with me."

"It's the kind of thing which must be investigated and investigated quickly. It's my job. There's a team of us working together. We've got to go over all of the passengers. We've already talked to quite a number..."

"I see," I said.

"About that barging in at this time," Flame said. "You could have called us. You could have called first, you know."

"I did, Mrs. Reed." He smiled with small brown teeth. "I've been working like a beast on this. I called at about... eight-thirty. Some joker got on the wire, said there was a party going on"—the smile broadened—"invited me over."

Dryly Flame said, "And you accepted the invitation."

"No, no, of course not. But as long as there was a party going on, I knew you folks would be here. I was in Newark then, talking with Mr. and Mrs. Gustafson. You know them?"

"We met them," Flame said.

He took a notebook from one pocket, a pen from another. "I'm told that you were rather friendly with him, doctor."

"I . . . I thought he was a nice man," I said.

"Please try to think about this, doctor."

"What?"

"Did he ever mention—suicide? Anything like that?"

"No. Never."

He made notes. "Thank you." He moved near to me, spoke in a confidential tone. "Now the last night out there was a party. We've got him practically down to about midnight. He was dancing"—he turned, smiled to Flame—"with Mrs. Reed. Were you dancing too, Dr. Reed?"

"No. I was in the bar adjacent."

He was back to making notes. "See him dancing with Mrs. Reed?"

"Yes."

"See them stop dancing?"

"No."

"Oh?" The bushy eyebrows lifted.

"I was invited to watch some . . . er . . . motion pictures."

"Didn't you ask your wife?"

"Yes. She didn't want to go. She preferred dancing."

He smiled again. He turned pages of the notebook, tapped a stubby finger at a page. "Checks out exactly. Checks out with the guy that ran the pictures. 'Dr. Reed's wife did not accompany him.'" He flipped back to the page he was working on, said, "We've got to ask these questions sneaky, doc. You can understand why." He was beginning to learn that Dr. Reed was not a malefactor, was an honorable physician giving honest answers, and he was growing friendly. "Now when you got out of the pictures, did you go back for your wife?"

"I can answer that," Flame said. "Sure, Mrs. Reed."

"Mr. Simone and I had just walked out of the ballroom, when my husband came."

"I had gone into the bar first, and looked in on the ballroom," I said. "Then I went out again, from the bar, and there they were."

"That's right," Flame said.

"Then?" Garson said.

"We said goodnight to Mr. Simone, and went to our stateroom."

"Stayed in for the night?" Garson said.

"No," I said hurriedly. "I saw my wife to the stateroom, then I went back to the bar for a last drink; then I went back and we stayed in for the night."

"Checks," Garson said with satisfaction, ruffling pages, pointing. "Checks with the bartender." He sighed. "Everything checks out—except we don't have the faintest idea about Simone. You didn't happen to see him when you went back for that drink, did you, doc?"

"No, I didn't."

"He didn't happen to say anything for a date later on at night, like he had a rendezvous, something like that—didn't happen to

mention anything like that to either of you, did he?"

"No," I said.

"No," Flame said.

"I was hoping." He sighed, scratched the top of the pen at his chin. "And nothing about suicide, no hints, nothing like that?"

"Nothing," I said.

"How about his attitude? You know, anything depressed, melancholy?"

"Not at all," I said.

"Quite the contrary," Flame said.

"Well that's about it. Thanks very much." He pocketed his notebook, snapped in his pen, lifted his hat, tossed his coat over his arm. "I'm darn sorry to have troubled you folks so late—but everybody's got his job, I suppose. The company'll be sending you statements to swear out, you know, affidavits. Me, I'm finished here. Thanks very much."

Flame rose. "Would you like a drink, Mr. Garson?"

"Thanks very much, no. Against company policy, you know. I'll have mine at a saloon. Got a trip in front of me. Real sorry I had to bust in on your party."

"I'll see you to the door," Flame said.

"Thanks very much."

Silence as they went to the door. Silence as it closed behind them. I stretched a hand, as though I were blind, feeling for the couch, and I sank into it, sat slumped, a tight drawing pain at the nape of my neck.

"Sonny-lad," Dora said, "you need a drink. Bad."

"Yes," I said.

"It's a good thing that guy was a stranger."

"Why?" I said.

"Because if he knew you, he'd have known you were lying like hell."

"Showed that bad?"

"Like a nine-month pregnancy it showed."

"Please get me that drink, Dora."

"Stay with it, kid."

Alone, I tapped myself for cigarettes, found the package, but I had no matches. My knees trembled as I crossed the room, haltingly, for the desk-lighter. My fingers shook as I lit the cigarette. I cursed at myself for my fright, for my reaction to fright; I drew deep breaths of air, choked on cigarette smoke, prayed for Dora's quick return. The door opened I whirled: "Dora"—but it was Flame.

"My God," she said, "you look like you're going to croak."

"I feel it," I said.

"All right. He's gone. Snap out of it."

"I can't, I can't. I was frightened to death."

"Big hero," she said. "My God, what a nothing I married. How the hell can you be a doctor?"

"Doctor? What's a doctor got to do with it? A doctor is a healer, a saver, not a destroyer."

"But a doctor's got to have guts."

"Not for this sort of thing. Not for killing."

"But he's got to stand up to emergencies."

"I've stood up to many emergencies—when I was on the right side, when I was on ground that I understood." My chuckle was ghastly. "I've been praised for it."

"Yeah, praised."

"But never anything like this. I've never known . . . anything like this." My gesture included her and she knew it. "This is new, strange, terrifying . . ."

"Coward," she said, her distaste a patent, humiliating, emetic expression around her mouth. "You're a nothing. You're water. A nothing, shivering, disgusting coward—"

"Yes I am," I said. "I've learned, the hard way. I've had experiences I never had before, things far out of my kind of life, my way of life. Yes, I've learned of a cowardice in me that I never knew existed, never suspected. Yes, I admit, in certain areas—"

"Where it can hurt you."

"—in certain areas, I have to admit—"

"Yeah, certain areas."

Dora came with a tray of Scotch, soda and ice cubes. I poured a slug, swallowed, grimaced, poured more, added ice and soda, sipped, squashed out the cigarette, lit another.

"You better keep him here," Flame said. "I'll attend to the company, they're all going home anyway. I'll tell them he got sick."

"Yes, please," I said gratefully.

"Take care of the hero," Flame said, punctuating her departure with a slam of the door. I hobbled back to the couch, sat drinking Scotch, feeling the warmth and the numbness and the spurious safety. Dora was very busy preparing a drink for herself, rattling the ice, pouring the Scotch, adding soda, making a ceremony of seating herself in the leather chair, crossing her legs, spreading her skirt, lighting a cigarette, extinguishing the match, puffing, blowing smoke, drinking her drink. But at length she said, softly, "Want to talk, boy?"

"Yes. To you. Only to you. To no one else."

I told her about my wife, I told her about my honeymoon, I told her about the ship, I told her about Pedro Simone.

"Still love her?" Dora said quietly.

"I'm obsessed," I said. "I think that's the best way to put it—obsessed. I hope, I hope you can understand. Obsessed. I can't be without her. Madness, lunacy, call it what the hell you want—call it callowness, youth, crazy passion—I can't be without her, *I can't be without her.* I pray to God it will end, I pray to God it *can* end—but it hasn't, it hasn't. It's worse."

"I understand, Don, I do, I do, I do." It was like a vague lament,

a threnody. "I was young once myself, strange as it may seem to you. I know the tortures, I know the horror. I know the entrapment. I pity you; in the good sense, believe me, I pity you."

"What do I do?"

"Who am I to answer? You do nothing. You roll with it, ride along with it. But try to be careful."

"This Pedro Simone thing. It's eating me, it's like acid eating inside of me."

"Oh, sweetheart, can I understand that."

"I know I should have reported it, of course I know. But I couldn't, honest to dear God, I couldn't. I was petrified, struck, overwhelmed, my insides like jelly, clammy jelly. It was an accident, sure it was an accident; a fight and an accident; it's happened to millions of people, and it happened to me. But I wasn't qualified, simply wasn't qualified. There's a deep, horrible fright in me, a cowardice, a strange sickly cowardice; you learn things about yourself when there's sufficient stress things you never suspected. I want to live. I have a life in front of me. I have plans. I don't want them damaged. I have so many plans. I'm just beginning."

"Easy, boy."

"Do you blame me, Dora? Truly?"

"Yes," she said.

"I should have reported it?"

"Yes," she said.

I pulled up a straight chair and sat close to her. "Leave cowardice aside. Leave panic aside. I couldn't have reported it—I was afraid. But leave all that aside. Logically, why? It was an accident. It happened. To report it—"

"He might have been saved."

"Impossible! He sank, disappeared. That ship was going at a real clip. We'd have been a mile away from him, more, before we'd even start to turn back. No, he could not have been saved—"

"I would have reported it, Don."

"Just a minute. Please bear with me. He couldn't have been saved, believe me; he was probably unconscious as he went over; he sank like a log. What sense to report it? What sense? Aside from cowardice, aside from panic—what sense? It would have blown wide open. A fight. Why a fight? You know how badly I lie—you heard tonight—and I'd have been questioned by experts. And they'd have asked her, and she's unpredictable, utterly unpredictable. It would have come out—skilled people would be asking the questions. Headlines. Newspaper stories. My career would be shot, yes — practically before it commenced. What sense, I beg of you—what sense?"

"I don't know," she said slowly. "We all owe certain duties, there's a certain integrity—"

"Duty! Integrity! For what? An accident happened, an awful, horrible accident. But it happened. What good to report it? It could

not be undone. What good—massacring a couple of additional lives? Look, I've thought about it. Oh, I'm not trying to cop a plea. I couldn't have reported it then—I couldn't have! But I gave myself these reasons, and they're lucid reasons, logical. What good, Dora? What earthly good?"

"Logic isn't always paramount, is it, Don?"

"No," I said.

"All right. Let it lie. Water over the bridge. I can't approve but I can't fight logic. It wouldn't have done any good, except for you, for you inside." She pinched out her cigarette, sighed. "So quickly, so fast, already trouble." She shrugged her shoulders. "Have you thought about—the man's family? Wife, perhaps; children? Don't you think that they should know—something. Not just up in the air; a man disappears—there's always some hope, hope; the human being fights off the thought of the irrevocable, of death. Have you thought of them?"

"Terribly," I said. "Two things have been gnawing at me, ripping at my guts—that, and another thing. Listen," I said, pulling myself to the edge of the chair, rocking. "Suppose we inquire, find out. If he has people, I'll write them, I'll drop them a note, I'll tell them. Oh, I'll be careful. I . . . I'll buy special paper, wear gloves, use a strange typewriter, mail it from out of the state—you know, all of that. Can we find out?"

"I'll do it," she said.

"No, Dora." Fright gnawed at me. "I don't want you to get mixed in this."

"Don't worry, Don. I'm an old hand at snooping. I'm an old-time newspaperwoman. I'll find out, stealthy as a sleuth. I'll find out, and we'll work that note out together."

"God, I'm despicable. Despicable," I said.

"Stop with the self-praise." She made a mouth at me. "Now what about that other thing? You said there were *two* things."

Suddenly I was whispering. "Yes. Her."

"Flame?"

I nodded. "The way she took it. Dora, I can't express it to you. It was like—nothing. Like a beetle had been stepped on. Less than that. Nothing. No reaction. Except about me—contempt—and after that a strange carnal interest. But for him—nothing. She had just been kissing him, making love with him—"

"And *that* doesn't bother you?"

"Of course, but that . . . sort of, I can understand; it's part of her, part of the sickness of her. But the other; that utter calm; not even calm—just nothing, *nothing!*"

"And still you want her, don't you?"

"Dreadfully," I said.

And so we settled down in the town of Spring Echo and in Octo-

ber I went to work. The hospital was small, and though efficiently run, poor. There were but two interns and we each worked a twelve-hour shift, alternating, once a month, from night duty to day duty. The hours were nine to nine, with a three-hour break, from twelve to three. Dr. Mark Shapiro, truly a guiding genuis, would take over during the break, whether day or night; he lived at the hospital; it was his home. Aside from his medical work, he was also managing-director; the hospital was the fabric of his life; and we, the young ones, the interns, tried to see to it that the old man stayed in bed at night—we generally remained at the hospital during the break on the night shift, reading, lounging or dozing. At the break on the day shift I went home—at the beginning.

After a while, I did not go home.

The marriage crumbled; degenerating slowly at first, accelerating toward the end. One day a week, each intern was off, the other putting in a full twenty-four hour grind. Dora Mason had checked on Pedro Simone and there had been no need for an anoymous letter; he had had no relatives except an elderly mother confined to an insane asylum; he himself had been an adventurer, a parasite of women, thrice married to rich wives, thrice divorced. And so, at the beginning, on my days off, I would take my wife into New York; a play, a night club (not *The Hotsy*), a fine restaurant; but after a while, her unflagging boredom beating upon me like a lash, I ended it, and that phase of our marriage passed without so much as a discussion.

Sarah, who had been in the employ of the household all of my life, quit. She could not accept the afternoon visits of the unexpected young men, the piled-up refuse of parties that would sometimes go on all night, the haphazard of no routine, the slush of a rotten marriage. The town was talking and I knew it: the side-long glances of the prudish matrons; the smirks of wise-alecks; an occasional titter from an adolescent ice-cream group in the drug store; but worst of all, the unspoken sympathy from old friends, from boys and girls who had grown up with me, from friends of my father, old friends of the family.

At the beginning, on the day shift, during the break in the afternoon, I would go home, but as her brazenness formed into pattern and all vestige of discretion evaporated, the young men were there when I came home: nice young men, handsome young men, furtive young men, brash young men, frightened young men; often they would try to talk with me, stumblingly, the pallor of the night still upon them; and just as often I was a surprise, a shock, an intrusion—husband? —why didn't somebody tell me?—who the hell could guess

she had a husband. And through it all there was Bill Floyd, always Bill Floyd, easy-going easy-talking Bill Floyd, graceful and insolent, lounging, innocent-eyed, smiling his devil's grin. Always there was Bill Floyd. Sometimes in the afternoon, alone; sometimes with the handsome boys in the afternoon; sometimes with the handsome boys and handsome girls in the afternoon; sometimes late at night, after *The Hotsy* closed, alone; sometimes late the night with other musicians, playing music; sometimes late at night with the musicians and the boys and the girls, the parties going on until morning, my house crowded with so many of them. And there were times when the house was dark and silent; all night; when there was nobody in the house all night, except me.

At the beginning, when the sickness of her was rampant in me, I thought there was no cure. At the beginning, when the sickness of her was in me, our arguments raged, the need of her impelling me; though I knew it was hopeless. And no matter how an argument would go, she had a trick that put a period to it and left it nowhere. She would go to sleep! She could go to sleep, at once, at will! At the end of a raving recriminating dispute, she could plump out on the bed, like a hurled pillow, and in minutes, she was asleep. It was a trick she had learned from her mother, that had been taught to her and practiced as a child, a trick of complete relaxation, a form of self-hypnosis: when she had had enough, she would simply go to sleep; lie out, close her eyes, concentrate and sleep; true sleep which would last a half-hour, an hour; but she was gone, she was out of it, she was away, she was asleep.

At the beginning, and all through the fall and winter, despising her, I had a need of her, primal as the need to breathe, urgent as the need for food; despising her, I despised myself more; and I thought there was no cure.

On a Wednesday at six o'clock of a cold afternoon in February I was lying supine, hands folded behind my head, on my cot in my room at the hospital when the phone beeped three short rings, code for emergency. I grabbed the receiver, said, "Where?"

"137 Carmelina."

I slid off the bed, snatched at my white jacket, donned it as I ran for the elevator, descended non-stop to the basement garage where Frank Farmer, the ambulance driver, already alerted, was waiting, the motor of the ambulance snarling in readiness. I climbed up front with him and we were off, siren low-pitch growling.

When we got there a young girl opened the door for us. She was pressing a towel against her wrist and there were blood stains. I followed her into the kitchen.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I'm afraid I cut myself trying to slice some meat."

She had evidently lost a lot of blood and she was scared. It needed three sutures and then I put a bandage around her wrist. It didn't take long but she seemed to be completely relaxed when I was finished.

"I'll give you a shot and then I suggest you lie down for an hour or so," I said.

"Shot? Where . . . In the arm?"

"No, in the other place."

She blushed a deep red. We were both about the same age and she was very pretty. I tried to act business like about the thing and avoid her meaning.

"I give a hundred shots a day, Miss. It won't hurt at all."

She just stared at me. Her eyes were big as saucers. She was wearing high-heeled black pumps, powder-blue tweed skirt and an ivory-white silk blouse. Looking at her I knew I had lost. I could feel the heat burning my ears. And she knew she had won. She turned and started away.

"We can go in here, Doctor."

We went into the bedroom. By the time I had given her the shot my hand was shaking so badly I dropped the hypo. She was prone on the bed with her panties down. She turned her head and said, "You were right, Doctor, that didn't hurt at all." There was no trace of innuendo in what she said. Her face was expressionless. She rose and adjusted her clothing.

"I'm giving you an appointment for tomorrow Miss Horton. Can you come to the hospital?"

"Sure. It's not far. Will I need more shots, Doctor." She smiled openly.

"We'll see," I said and left hurriedly.

Alice Horton came the next day, with her mother; it was as though it were a rendezvous; I had had no appetite for food; I had been short with patients, curt with nurses, and on my one emergency, I had ridden in back of the ambulance; I had had no taste for Frank Farmer's good-natured badinage. She came the next day, with her mother—I had fretted all morning as though the dressing were the first after major surgery—and I had taken them to my own room for the dressing of the wound. Alice, stoically accepted treatment; it was a matter of cutting the bandage, easing it from adhesive blood-crust, throwing on additional antibiotic, re-bandaging and saying in best bedside manner, "Fine, fine, forget it. Come in a week from now and let me take the stitches out. It won't hurt, won't hurt a bit." And then I drove them home, managed to make a date with Alice on the way.

We were drawn to one another, no question; but after that first overt verbalized flirtation, we were

as sacrosanct in physical connection as hymn singers at a prayer meeting. We talked, incessantly; there were deep pits of personality to discover and probe; we found so much, one in the other, that surprised and delighted us; we extracted, one from the other (ecstatic pluckers), inner thoughts, inner ambitions, inner secrets, inner desires; ideas that we hardly suspected existed within us were drawn, one from the other, to be discussed, expounded, explained, interpreted, sometimes to an impasse of futile fury, sometimes to the pure laughter of complete understanding; we talked; we talked; we inspired one another, complimented one another, motivated one another; there were the books we had dreamed over as children and the books we now loved as adults, there were the movie stars we admired or detested, the writers whom we adored or despised; there was religion and family and politics and poetry and music and painting and little hunks of philosophy; and there were ourselves; she learned a good deal (not all) about me and I learned a good deal about her including the fact that she had been "going quite steady" with a young man in Connecticut, a young man whom she had known all her "grown-up" life, that there had been a tentative plan, with encouragement from the family, to announce their engagement shortly. Three months later, in May, she was not yet engaged.

We saw each other every day. We took coffee together at the hospital; we had lunch or dinner or supper at appropriate moments on propitious days. We had dates whenever we could make it: in nearby towns, in Newark, in New York. We may have been the subject of gossip: a small town has big eyes—but I did not care.

I got home at nine-thirty one evening. The day had dampened to an oppressive night, wet and humid. The house was dark. There was nobody home. Wedding anniversary and nobody home. I opened the cabinet and had a quick drink, and another. Who was I to kick? Husband comes home to request divorce and objects to fact that wife is not there. Somewhere there was humor in it, rotten, macabre humor; in a cockeyed way my resentment was funny. I went to the kitchen for a cold drink. It was a mess, food still on the kitchen table, dishes piled in the sink, a dank smell, a faucet dripping liquidly. I pushed the faucet shut, drank pop from a bottle, went back to the living room. I had another drink and toured my house, ramblingly. I inspected the new furnishings of the rooms, hungered for the ancient carpets, the heavy old furniture, the pictures on the walls that had been my friends. I sighed, choking; the house stifling, airless; the windows were closed; heat of day imprisoned in a lifeless house. I pushed open case-

ment windows and went upstairs to the bedroom.

Mess again. Beds unmade. Windows shut. No ventilation. Faint-fetid smell in the torpid air of the musk of her perfume touching a tick of memory, reminding me of the beginning, of the madness, of the poisonous lure of her. I shook it off, opened the windows, stuck my head out for air, came back, began to undress, changed my mind. This was to be a formal talk, and formal talks do not happen in pajamas. I was prickly with perspiration, my shirt sticking to me. I decided to shower and change. The shower was long and cool, the new underclothing refreshing, but there was no sport shirt, the only clean shirts had French cuffs. I opened the top drawer of the chest, seeking cufflinks, my fingers groping, and I came upon the revolver. I took it out and looked at it. It was not the first time, since my marriage, that I had looked at the revolver. There had been nights when, despairing, despised, flogged by her utter indifference I had sneaked from my bed drawn as though by an evil loadstone to the top drawer of the chest and I had looked at the revolver, I had fondled it; there had been many nights, after her parties, after her young men, after Floyd, as she lay asleep, stinking sweet of champagne, that I had held the revolver, fighting against insane almost irresistible impulse, lucid terror of the consequences mitigating the madness, subduing me to the quaking coward I was, restraining me. Now, I balanced it in my hand, rubbed its coldness against my face. Revolver. Weapon of violence. Instrument of protection. Protection? Or destruction? A premonitory shudder rattled through me. Hastily I put it back into the drawer, found the links, hooked up my cuffs put on a tie and jacket, and went back downstairs.

I switched on the television, watched sleepily until midnight. Then I slung out on the couch with a book. I read and dozed and it was after five o'clock when the slam of a car-door sat me up bolt-upright. I heard Bill Floyd drunkenly yelling good night to her, I heard her yell back: "Cheerio" and then, after much scraping of the key in the lock and another reckless door-slam, this time our entrance door she swaggered in, wrapped in a tight beaded dress a lightweight silk coat hanging like a toreador's, over one shoulder. She saw me, squinted sourly, an expression of surprise and distaste puckering her face, shrugged, turned and proceeded to the stairs.

"Just a minute!" I called.

She stopped at the bottom step, glanced at me over her shoulder, said, "Why don't you go to sleep, doctor?" She shrugged again and continued up the stairs.

"I want to talk to you!" I called.

There was no reply. I heard her kick open the bedroom door and I

heard her moving about, noisily. I put my book away straightened my clothes switched off the lights, and went up to the bedroom. She was seated on a boudoir chair vacantly staring at her three reflections in the triple-mirror of the boudoir table. Now focus came into her eyes. Now she was staring at *my* three reflections in the triple-mirror. "What the hell are you all dolled up for?" she said. "What are you—out of your mind?"

"I want to talk to you."

She swung around. "Well you're not going to make a speech in an auditorium, are you?"

"I'm going to make a speech to you."

"So what's with the fancy clothes?" She stood up, yawned. "Why don't you go to sleep for Chrissake?" She began to unzip her dress.

"I want to talk to you."

"Talk to me some other time, huh? I'm beat, real beat." She pulled the dress over her head, flung it away.

"Now," I said.

"What the hell is it with you?" She looked at her watch. "It's six o'clock in the morning, man. What is it with you? You want to make love? No. Some other time. I'm beat. Go to bed, will you? You look real sharp in your nice new suit and your nice fancy shirt and all that. Okay. You made an impression on me, but let's save it for another time, huh? Go to sleep now. You got to get up in the morning, remember, doctor?"

I took off my jacket and opened my tie. I was small near her, always small, though I was inches taller than she and five times as powerful and once and a half her weight; small always, near her, small, cringing almost. "I want to talk to you," I said.

"Oh no!" She groaned. "You back on that pitch? If you said it once, you said it forty times. What the holy hell do you want to talk about?"

"I want a divorce."

She stood stock-still, beautiful as ever, tall and beautiful, high-carriaged, stately, imperious, licentious in black bra, black briefs, sheer black hose, black spike-heeled shoes; strangely bewitching even now.

"You—*what?*" she said.

"I want a divorce."

Her hands went to her hips, her eyes expanded, and then a short laugh came like a rasp. "You want a divorce, do you? Well, how very nice. How very pretty. How just sweet and dandy."

"Look," I said, "it's no good. It's been no good right from the start."

"I didn't hear any complaints—right from the start."

"Perhaps I didn't realize, back then, just how bad it was, but we both certainly know now—"

"I like it."

"It's got to end," I said. "Damn, it's got to! It's rotten, no good, a

mistake, a bad mistake. Okay, a mistake can be corrected."

"'A mistake can be corrected,'" she mimicked, came to me, tapped a finger at my chest, cloy-smell of champagne coming off her glistening mouth as she talked. "Look, little doctor, I know what's got your belly in such an uproar. I know all about that little blonde punk, that Alice Horton."

"And I know all about Bill Floyd."

"You do, hey?" Her hands were back on her hips. "So what?"

"I—I can divorce *you*."

"Try!"

"*I* can be the complaint. It certainly won't be tough to accumulate evidence."

"You just go ahead and try that, fella. I'd love to have you try. I'll stink up this town—the whole state—with a scandall that'll knock you right into left field. And let's see if that blonde little punk will have you after that. Let's just try that and see, huh?" And right then, so palpably it was like a shifting of gears, there was an abrupt metamorphosis of attitude: it was as though realization had penetrated that Donny-boy had finally slipped the shackles; once more Donny-boy must be ensnared and neatly fettered down. She patted my cheek like an indulgent parent, lightly pinched it, kicked out of her shoes, lifted each long leg carefully and high, removed her stockings and held them out, loosely shimmering. "Would you please put these away?" she said slow-sweet, the voice quite deep, the eyes wanton-tender, one dark eyebrow slightly scaled above the other.

I was not buying. I slapped the stockings out of her hand. She pouted at me, pleasantly—Donny-boy was still playing the wilful child, was he? — and shrugged, undefeated; Donny-boy, playing games, must cease and desist; must return, panting, pleading and remorseful to the verities. The edges of her eyes smiled as she hooked thumbs, slender fingers gracefully spread, within the elastic girdling her waist and slowly lowered her briefs, kicking out of them. With but a hint of flowing (and practiced) undulation of body, her hands nimbled behind her back, touching loose the bra; she let it fall, cupped hands, as always, daintily massaging, kneading circulation; her eyes, very certain now, moving over my face like a caress; the light sway of her body slowly picking up tempo; a tiny quivering, lewd-gentle smile at her mouth; tip of red tongue licking out to moisten red lips. "Go to bed," she said softly. "Really, it's late. We'll talk tomorrow."

"We're talking now."

A queer, puzzled expression hit her eyes; bafflement, unexpected as a sudden speck of cinder, caused her to blink, blinkingly frown; a flush sprayed the tan-gold cheeks. "Drop dead, son of a bitch," she

said, and stood for a last moment, tall, firm, sculptured, beautiful; and ineffably contemptuous. Then she spun about, shy modest creature, hurrying to the closest; she flung open the door, quickly selected a thick-silk, wide-sleeved kimono, chastely wrapped herself within its folds, and sternly tightened the braided belt. "All right," she said. "We've had it. We've had our little talk. You want a divorce? No. Period. We'll have our divorce when *I* want it, when I'm good and ready for it—when it'll be for *my* good, not yours. So okay, doctor. So we've had our little talk. So now go creep back under your rock and stay there."

And suddenly, it came to me. Suddenly, the reluctant bud matured, morbidly blossoming. Suddenly, the lingering long illness shot to febrile crisis. Suddenly all of it fused—shame, resentment, ridicule, lust, hate, guilt, entrapment—all of it fused to bleak and awful clarity; whirled to a shock-point of stop, utter end; burgeoned, burst and crystallized.

I would have to kill her.

How do you kill your wife? Specifically, how do *I* kill my wife? How do you kill without consequence? Not I. Impossible. Any investigation into the fabric of our marriage—the present personal lives of either of us—would render me suspect, culpable, even if another committed the murder, unless I could *prove* that it was not I. How does one kill one's wife without consequence? How do I? How does one think about it, sanely? Can one, somehow, kill and keep clear of it, protect every flank? I was cautious; she was so right; I was a coward; again she was so right; I wanted the crime but what sense the crime unless you can enjoy the fruits of it. How? How? How? How for me—Donald Reed? I stifled a groan, my heart thumping in panic, frightened, frightened of me, frightened of myself, frightened of my own unsuppressible thoughts; I turned in my bed, of a hot humid night in my father's house by the sea; alone, terrified, isolated; Donald Reed, human being, under stress up to now but fairly normal; I lay there, knees up and sweating, tight in foetal paroxysm, huddled in a clamped agony, filled with the blood-pounding, nauseating, ear-bursting, dreadful, many-pronged catechism: *how do I murder my wife?*

At twelve o'clock midnight I was driving through the rain to New York. The bridge was a splashing grey hulk through the running wet smear as the wipers thumped their rhythmic dirge.

An hour later I arrived at *The Hotsy* almost jauntily. I noted that the canopy was new, more fancy; and a new front had been added to the premises. Inside, it had been entirely re-done: there was now an

outer vestibule with a checkroom on the left and toilets, daintily marked in curlicued script HOMMES and FEMMES, on the right. I checked my raincoat and went into HOMMES where I washed my face and combed my hair, and back in the vestibule I went to an archway where I was greeted by a new maitre d'—tall, rigid, white-haired, white-mustached—who said, "How many, please?"

"Just me," I said.

"This way, please."

The Bill Floyd Trio, on the right-hand platform, was making its music; already my feet were tapping to the beat. Even they were fancy now, in the new prosperity: they wore navy-blue tuxedoes, the lapels trimmed with navy-blue satin; but Bill Floyd's lacy-chest shirt was patently of silk and the collar was long and free-flowing.

"Bourbon and water," I said to the waiter who suddenly stood above me, pad in hand.

"Yes, sir."

"Double," I said.

When the waiter brought my drink and placed it with a flourish before me, I said, "When is Floyd through with this set?"

"Soon," he said. "Couple minutes."

"Will you tell him I'd like to see him, please? I mean, after he's through."

"He don't like to sit with the customers, sir. It's kinda a rule of the house."

"I'm a friend of his. Tell him Dr. Reed. Will you, please?"

The title always works its wonders, especially with waiters. "Okay, doctor, I'll tell him. Only I can't guarantee he shows."

"Thank you," I said. "And, oh—another bourbon."

"Double?"

"Naturally."

"Yes, sir, doctor."

I was sipping my new bourbon, beginning to realize that I was getting drunk—rationalizing that it was about time, that it was my day off, that, with my troubles, I was entitled to a binge—when he slipped into the seat opposite me.

"A fine night," he said, *"you* picked to show up."

I did not understand.

"Yes," I said. "Miserable out."

"Still raining?"

"Raining like hell. Summer rain, that's the worst."

"Yeah," he said. "How are you, doctor?"

"Pretty nothing," I said.

"That's no change," he said, and grinned his white-toothed wolf-grin, not unattractive.

"Thanks," I said.

"Doc," he said, "from me you don't get no compliments. To me, you're a jerk, in spades, period. What do you want me to do, kid you?" He waved to the waiter. "Gin and tonic," he said.

"Floyd," I said, "will you help me?"

"I'm not interested in you, doc. Just between us."

"You know I want out."

"I don't care what you want, doc." He lit a cigarette, blew the smoke in my face. "Once upon a time, I talked out of turn to a chump—you. I tried to give you advice, help, whatever the hell you want to call it. I put out for you, but you knocked me down. I told you to go break a leg. So go break a leg, doc."

"You know I've asked her for a divorce," I said.

"I don't care what you asked her for."

"You want her, don't you? For God's sake, you do want her, don't you?"

"I got her, doc," he said.

"Free and clear."

"That's how I got her."

"Are you important to her?"

That caught him as he was rising from his seat. He sank back. "Lay off, doc. Leave me out. Don't mix me in. You got nothing to do with me. I live my life like I see it. You live yours. To me you're a chump, in spades, a hundred percent, but a chump. Now do yourself a favor, doc. Go home. Now. Go home and go to sleep." He stood up. "Last time I ever give you advice. Go home. Now."

I sat alone and drank. The organ music ceased. The Bill Floyd Trio commenced the beat. I sat back and smoked and drank and hated myself. I did not hate him. Like Dora, in some vague oblique manner, I understood him and did not condemn him. He had his cross to carry, as we all have; perhaps his method of toting his burden was different from mine; but he had a cross to carry; it was written in his eyes. Poor Bill Floyd. No. I sat up straight. He was right. I was drunk. Suddenly, sodden in a cellar trap, my foot beating the floor to the music, I was being sorry for Bill Floyd. The room was beginning to spin, as I finished my drink.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the voice announced. "We have a wonderful surprise. Every now and then we have a substitute for Bela-Bela. Not a substitute—but the original. Ladies and gentlemen—in Bela-Bela's costume — not Bela-Bela — but the original Bill Floyd discovery—*Flame Cortez!*"

Drums throbbed, music shrilled, curtains parted and red spotlight gathered about a wild-dancing, writhing, strutting, grinding, arms-upstretched, tall, perfect-bodied, black-haired, black-eyed, tan-gold, naked woman; naked except for metallic silver fig-leaf, tiny bells attached, and metallic silver breast-plates, tiny bells attached, lewd, squirming, graceful, proud—as a murmur-roar of appreciation welled from the audience and a mass-clap of surging applause drowned the music and then died away; as dead silence encompassed an audience as

the bell-dance was danced as in a seraglio; as the music grew wilder than ever I had heard it; as the dance grew wilder than ever I had seen it; as I folded back against the wall, sick at my stomach. Come look, Spring Echo! Come look at the doctor's wife; come look at the long-curved, lascivious, tan-gold body; come look at the out-thrust parts, teasing, undulating, gleaming; come look at the mad eyes, proud, disdainful, contemptuous; come look at the doctor's wife exposed to an awe-struck, dead silent, hardly-breathing audience.

"No!"

It was I.

"Stop!" It was I. The scream was mine. The hoarse-dreadful rasp-scream was mine. It was I, lurching up, table toppling in front of me. "Stop! Stop! Stop!" It was I—as the dance went on and the music pounded and Bill Floyd smiled—who was pounced upon by three heavy-set men, beaten quickly to silence, quickly pull-dragged out of the dim room, beaten in the vestibule until a cut opened on my cheek, dragged up the steps and flung into the dismal gutter. I heard, almost insensible, "What about the bum's coat?"

A female voice: "Trench-coat. I'll get it."

And a coat, like a friendly blanket, was flung upon me as I lay, mud and blood on my face, in the gutter, rain falling.

Winter passed and summer came. The situation with my wife deteriorated to a sort of numb void. It was August. A Friday in August. I turned and choked off the alarm. The sun, already bright, glowed along the edges of the light-proof shades. I yawned, threw off the sheet, swung out of bed, and took my shower. I dressed and went downstairs and prepared my breakfast and ate and went back upstairs for my jacket. She was up and out of bed. At eight-thirty in the morning, she was out of bed, sitting before the triple mirrors of her vanity, wearing a wide-necked clinging dressing-gown, touching make-up to her face. I slipped into my jacket.

"What's the holiday?" I said.

"What's that?" she said, lipstick-pinky at her lips.

"What are *you* doing up this early?"

"You on the day shift, little doctor? Or on the night shift? Or is there a new shift? Me, I get mixed up."

"What are you doing up this early? Or are you going to bed?"

"What a lousy little town," she said. "Lousy, miserable, little town. One broken-down hospital and two little interns. One little intern works by day, one little intern works by day. Big deal."

"That's all the town requires—"

"Well, I'll tell you something this town *don't* require. Me!" She flung up from the vanity, strode toward me. "I'm sick and tired of this rot-

ten little hole. Sick to the stomach. Sick, sick, sick. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you," I said wearily. "I've heard you before."

"Why?" I said and I yawned. "You going somewhere?"

"That's right."

"What?" I was suddenly tense, awake, alive.

"I'm pulling up stakes, that's what."

"You mean you've decided to agree—"

"I've decided to agree to nothing."

"But you just said—"

"That I'm pulling up stakes." She smiled mockingly. "You're referring to the divorce, aren't you? The suggested divorce?"

"Yes."

"No divorce. I'm not ready yet. I got other things to do. I got fish to fry."

"Do! Fry! But let me out of this mess!"

"No sir. You're not squirming off this hook. You give me—what do they call it?—respectability." Her voice slid to thin-pitched mimicry. "Mrs. Doctor Donald Reed. I'm from a little town on the Jersey shore, cutest little town called Spring Echo. My husband's a physician there; yes, fine old family. You must call on me if you're ever in the vicinity."

"What's going on?" I said. "What the hell is going on here?"

She spread the skirt of the dressing gown in an elaborate curtsy, turned, and swept to the tall chest of drawers. She pulled open the top drawer, reached in deeply, tossed things aside, rummaged, and, two bank books in her hand, turned back to me.

"This is what's going on here," she said.

She cast the books to the floor at my feet. I bent, picked them up—they were the books of our joint savings accounts riddled with perforations marking them CLOSED.

"No," I said, unbelieving.

"Yes, Donny-boy. Oh yes. I earned it.

My fingers tipped the edges of the books, riffling them; I felt my face squeeze to grimace; I looked at the little perforations whirling in design — CLOSED. Breath wheezed in my throat.

"Thief, too?" I said. "No! My God, no! Please, no!"

"I'm no thief. I took what's coming to me, period. I earned every nickel."

It would not penetrate. "No," I pleaded. "Please, not a thief too."

She crossed to her bed, violently shoved the mattress askew. Two bank-packed sheafs of bills lay on the spring, and my revolver. She took up the packages of bills in her left hand, the revolver in her right. "This is it." She waved the left hand. "Booby prize. For me." Her right hand raised. The revolver gleamed. "Would you like to try to take it away from me? Come on. Others have killed husbands in the heat of dispute, in self-defense; I'll

take my chances. Come on!" I did not move. Her eyes touched on the gun, came back to me. A smile was a sneer. "How many times have you held this little monster in your hand — lovingly? When you thought I was asleep? How many times have you held it — and thought of using it—on me?"

"No . . ." It was a wail, of guilt.

"Never had the nerve, did you? Well, I have. Come on. Try me."

I tossed the used-up bank books to the floor.

"You've never had the nerve for nothing," she said. "Brother, I know you for just what you are. A weak, spineless, miserable nothing. Nothing!"

"Thief," I said.

"You want to fight me on that? You can try that too. Go ahead and fight me on a joint savings account. Try and win."

"God, the filth I've mixed with, the filth I've lived with." A chill of loathing passed through me like a shivering ague. "Wherever you're going," I said, "don't ever come back."

"Back to this burg! Don't hold your breath that long! I'm going to Europe. I'm going to live the life. And if I ever come back, it won't be to this measly town, this stinking old house."

"Europe," I said. "New worlds to conquer for Bill Floyd? Or should I say old worlds?"

"New worlds to conquer—for me."

"No Bill?"

"The hell with Bill—like the hell with you."

"Look. Please." I tried again, for the last time. "You've got it all, and you're all finished here. Then why don't we do it right? Why don't we get it over with, once and for all? Clean. A clean break."

"Because I'm not ready yet. Simple? That's why." She went to the chest of drawers. She put the money into the top drawer; kept the revolver in her hand, leaning her elbow on a corner of the chest. "You may get your divorce," she said. "Maybe it'll be soon, maybe a long time. I got things to do—and one thing I'm *never* going to do is go back to that hoochie-coochie wriggle act—not for a living, I mean."

"Then what—"

"I stay the respectable Mrs. Doctor Donald Reed until I can trade that title in for something better. And you got no grounds for divorce, Donny-boy—a wife is entitled to take a trip for her health. So keep your fingers crossed, and root for me. And like that you'll be rooting for yourself and that new dame too. Could take months—could take years. You just keep rooting, pal."

"Bill Floyd going to root for you too?"

"Real sharp, huh? You just let *me* worry about Bill Floyd."

"Worry," I said. "You better worry. Because maybe you can push *me* around. Maybe I'm easy—I've

got a future that I keep thinking about. But not that monkey; not Bill Floyd; that's a mean one, that monkey. Maybe in the end, Bill Floyd, maybe of all people, he'll produce the poetic justice."

"Poetic justice, huh?" The lids of the dark eyes lowered to the squint of an amused, assured smile. "You leave that poet to me. Monkey is right. You're all monkeys. Just leave that monkey to me. I'll have him here this afternoon. I'm going to tell *him* off just like I told *you* off. And believe me, he'll be easier to shake—than you."

"Wanna bet?" I said. "Wanna bet my forty thousand dollars?"

"*My* forty thousand dollars, pal. You're getting mixed up."

"I'm afraid he won't shake as easy as you think." In turmoil, one chooses strange champions.

"Afraid is right. You're afraid—you're not kidding. You're afraid, period. You're afraid of everything." Her smile was a knife. "Look, hero, you and that Bill Floyd, there's no difference. You're the same, in reverse. And I'll slip you a great big secret—I'm sick to death of both of you."

"Same in reverse? Bill Floyd? I don't—"

"You got brains—and no guts. He's got guts—and no brains. Me—I got both." She came to me, poked at my chest with the gleaming gun. "So all right, doctor. So now you know what I'm doing up so early in the morning. I got a lot of things to do; packing; a lot of things. So go to work, doctor. And when you come home tonight, you got yourself a nice empty house, for all time; no wife, no worries, no headaches, no nothing. A nice empty house. So go to work, little doctor, and when you come home tonight—enjoy."

I went to the hospital but I couldn't work. I was dazed. I had to think. There had to be something I could do.

Money; rock-bottom, soul-scraping, pragmatic, non-ethereal — that became the focal point of my thinking; not the lust of my life who was leaving me; not the love of my life who was being taken from me; money; lucre; black, ugly, innocent, necessary; that, as I squirmed in torture on my cot, became the focal point of my thinking—hating my wife; I want my money. I totted up assets like an auditor. Of the five thousand dollars I had had in my checking account, fifteen hundred remained; mine had been a free and foolish hand at writing checks. There was the house and the furniture, but that could not bring much; very little, in fact. Real estate is cheap in a small town, and second hand furniture is practically valueless—try and get rid of it when you want to. And if I sold the house, there would be no site for a future office; a doctor did not practice out of an office-building in Spring Echo.

The phone-clang interrupted, peremptorily.

Three short-sharp rings—code for emergency.

I seized the receiver. "Yes?"

"Police call. Emergency. 1600 Fairfield."

"Repeat!"

"Police call. 1600 Fairfield."

"Right!"

I ran. I did not wait for the elevator. I ran down the stairs and into the garage and up onto the front seat with Frank Farmer and, siren wailing, we were rolling.

"You know where?" Frank said.

"Yes," I said.

1600 Fairfield was my house!

We were there in five minutes. I leaped from the ambulance before it ceased motion, raced along the familiar pathway, burst into the house.

There were three people in my living room.

There was Mulloy—short, thick, powerful, square-faced, rasp-voiced; chief of detectives for the town. There was Borden, a uniformed cop, formerly a life-guard; my age; we had gone to elementary school together as children. And linked to Borden wrist to wrist by manacles —Bill Floyd.

Bill Floyd.

Tall in a hand-tailored black suit and white silk shirt with flowing collar and black thin tie slightly awry, Bill Floyd, pale as death, reeking of gin, hollow-eyed, white hair sweatily matted to his head, started talking the moment he saw me.

"I killed her," he said. "Killed that bastardly bitch."

"What? What's that?" I blurted.

"Me!" he shouted. "I killed her and I admit it! I killed her and I'm proud of it! I'm not you! I'm no chump! I'm no sucker! Not me! Not Bill Floyd! I'm not you! I'm no stupid hick from the sticks! Nobody pushes me around, nobody soft-talks me, nobody throws me back in the pond like all of a sudden I'm a fish that's not big enough . . ."

I looked to Mulloy.

"Where is she?"

"Upstairs," Mulloy rasped. "In the bedroom."

Bill Floyd pulled at the handcuff, dragging the young cop with him. He reached out the claw of his free right hand and grasped my sleeve, tugging. "I give her what she's been asking for—a pair of hands around the throat. I squeeze her like she's been begging for since she's born. I give it to her around the throat—I squeeze her till she can't talk no more—till she can't soft-talk nobody else no more." Sweat was on his face, dripping from the deep sockets of his eyes like tears. "I give her what she's been begging for, and then I come down here, and I use this phone, and I call the cops. I'm no rat looking to run. Not me. Not Bill Floyd. I killed her, and I admit it, and I don't care what happens

to me—how do you like that?—I don't care..."

I pulled out of his clutch and ran to the stairs.

I heard Mulloy calling after me. "Wait! Wait a minute!"

But I was not waiting. I was not waiting a minute. I was not waiting a second. There were forty thousand dollars up there, mine, my money, money my father had saved for me, for *me,* and I wanted to get my hands on it. It belonged to me. It had a use; a good use; I wanted it; I wanted my money.

I went up the stairs two at a time and I opened the bedroom door and closed it behind me. The key was in the lock. I turned it and went directly to the tall chest. She was lying on the bed but I did not give her a second look. I pulled open the wide top drawer and there they were, neat and oblong, two bank-packed sheafs; and there was the glittering revolver. I grabbed the packages of money and sank into the boudoir chair at the vanity table and I rested, staring at my treasure, as I heaved for breath, waiting for the thumping at my heart to subside. And then I sighed deeply, and looked up, looking at the triple mirrors of the vanity—and a chill like a chill of death rustled through me; ice tingled at the marrow of my bones.

A reflection was sitting up!

Three reflections were sitting up!

Flame Cortez, in reflection, in triplicate, was sitting up in bed!

She was sitting up!

I whirled out of the chair, twisting up, coming to my feet, shifting the money to my left hand, reaching into the open drawer for the revolver with my right. I stood transfixed; I kept shaking my head, shaking off spasms of vertigo, as I goggled at the bed, horror crawling my flesh.

She was sitting up, her long fingers touching at her throat.

"No," I grated. "No, no..."

"Yes," she said.

"You . . . you're . . . dead!"

"Not quite," she said. She slung her legs off the bed, stretched her arms, shivered as one shivers when one yawns, shivered in a form of awakening ecstasy, stood up. "He's a musician," she said, "not a murderer; and a drunken musician, at that. He squeezed but he didn't squeeze hard enough. I passed out."

"No! The police..."

"You think I'm a ghost?"

"I don't know what the hell you are. *I don't know.*"

"No ghost, little doctor. I bet you wish I were."

"Passed out?" I said thinly, from somewhere.

There's a difference between passing out and dying, isn't there, little doctor?" She walked toward me, steadily, implacably.

"Get away," I said.

"Oh, I'll get away. I'll get all the way, believe me."

The gun was pointing at her. "Get away!"

But she came near and her hand flashed out and she seized the packets of money from my cold nerveless rigid fingers, and then she backed away, backed away slowly; and somehow, then, as though she were first coming into full focus, I took notice of what she was wearing: a suit, a tan gabardine suit and a white fluffy blouse, but her shoes were off. Softly, slowly, in her stockinged feet, her eyes holding to mine, she backed away, and then she bowed, a curl-smiled leering burlesque of a gracious bow.

"We go to type," she said, "don't we? You're a nothing and you'll always be a nothing."

The gun was pointing at her.

The cold finger at the trigger was cramped.

"No courage," she said. "Not even now."

"Shut up!"

"He's a better man than you are; always was, that crazy musician. I got to respect him; *him,* at least, I got to respect. He never had to take what you had to take, but when I kissed him off, he didn't go to logic, he didn't go to reason, he didn't snivel away—he acted. Thought he killed me, the chump, the stupid crazy chump, but he acted, at least he acted. Now put that gun away, my cautious little husband. You don't want trouble, do you, Donny-boy?"

I lowered the gun.

And her smile curled widely over her mouth; and her teeth gleamed; and her eyes, crinkle-cornered, expressed final insolent triumph; and the contumelious, despising, awful contempt that marked her face was the everlasting stigma she bequeathed, at end, with which, indelibly, I would have to live for all the rest of my time—but no!—at that instant it came to me!—right then I was released, emancipated, extricated, reprieved!—all my beautiful plans restored—I was free—because she was dead! *She was dead! A man had admitted throttling her to death. A man who was manacled to the police now, right now, had admitted killing her. I was covered. She was dead and another had admitted the guilt. There could be no kick-back, no consequences, no jeopardy. I was free right now. Now! I could have my life; all life was before me; my dreams resurrected. What was I waiting for?*

I threw the gun to the floor and her disdainful smile approved as she nodded, eyelids fluttering. I went to her; slowly; feet heavy; thighs rigid; inexorably; and her smile congealed; and a look of puzzlement came to her eyes; an opaque squint-look of baffled, animal, ineffable curiosity; but she did not move back; she stood her ground.

And I seized her.

She struggled but it was puny against my madness. I threw her

to the bed, all my weight upon her, my knees at the base of her stomach, my fingers pressed about her throat. I heard, as though hearing some dreadful other, the growling atavistic squeak-sound of my voice: "You're dead, dead, dead, dead; and I didn't kill you; not me, not me; he did; he; Bill; Bill Floyd; he's admitted it, admitted it, admitted it..."

And for the first time since I first saw her, for the first time, so strangely, actually, there was an expression of love in her eyes; love and terror; love, in the now-bulging eyes, and, queerly, approval; love, respect and approval clearly intermingled, before she died, with stark, unmitigated, egregious and satisfactory—terror.

I cleaned up quickly. I put the money into an inside pocket, returned the revolver to the drawer, straightened her, fixed her, adjusted her, and left her as I had found her upon the bed. I took a last quick look about the room, turned the key, opened the door, left it open and skimmed down the stairs.

Bill Floyd was seated with Borden on the couch.

Sullen now, he raised his eyes to me and dropped them.

Mulloy was pacing.

Borden said, "Okay, do we go now, Chief?"

"Just a minute," Mulloy said. He came to me, touched my wrist, said, "You and me, let's go in the kitchen, huh, Doc?"

"Sure," I said.

In the rear, in the kitchen, Mulloy swung open the dor of the refrigerator, said, "Okay if I wet the whistle, Doc?"

"Sure," I said.

He took out a bottle of pop, used an opener to flip the cover, gurgled the contents from the mouth of the bottle, set it down empty, said, "Thanks, Doc."

"Sure," I said.

He looked out the window. "Nasty mess, this sort of thing."

"Sure," I said.

"How is she?"

"Pardon?"

"How's the Missus?"

"What?"

"The Missus," he said.

"What's the matter with you, Mulloy?"

He talked around the cigar. "This kind of nasty mess, the triangle-bit, I'm what you call a diplomat. Also, when you got a guy dead to rights, you hang on to him. Why do you think I called the hospital and not the morgue?"

"Why?" I said faintly.

He chuckled. He smiled. "Guy thinks he killed her—let him think." He took the cigar out of his mouth, held it between the stubby fingers of one hand, used a handkerchief with the other hand to mop his face. "Let the bum sweat a while, I always say. Makes it easier to get a full statement. Maybe we don't have him for murder, but we got him good anyway. Got him solid—

for assault and battery with intent to kill. Got him also for some marijuana weeds in his pockets. Don't mention nothing to him yet. We'll get him out of here before we take her statement."

My tongue was a bulge in my mouth.

"What happened here, Mulloy?"

He moved about, handkerchief still in hand, heels clicking on the tiles of the kitchen floor. "We get this call down at the house, and we jump to it, young Borden and me. We find this drunk sitting downstairs with his head in his hands, babbling he killed her, choked her to death, upstairs. Borden puts the cuffs on him and I run up."

"The bedroom?"

"Yeah. That's where he said."

"You . . . you found her there?"

"Yeah, sure, on the bed, but like you saw, Doc, not dead."

"Not dead," I said casually, wearily, dizzily, as the room spun and the cigar smoke made me ill. "Not dead," I said and from somewhere, nowhere, I heard laughter. "Yes, Mulloy, not dead."

"Passed out," he said. "I start slapping her around a little bit and she comes to. I get her off the bed, walk her a little—but she don't look too good. I tell her not to worry, that we got the guy, but to stay right there in the room, rest a little, take it easy—till we finish off with him. She questions me close. She wants to be sure we got him nailed. I tell her don't worry, but she's to stay in the room and not come out—no yelling down, no stuff like that—till we finish off with him. She says okay, kicks out of her shoes, lays out on the bed, says, nice and cool like, maybe she'll take a nap. She's looking a little pale, so I go out to get her some water."

"Down here?"

"No. I don't want him to see me carrying a glass of water. I don't know the lay of the house, so I prowl around upstairs till I find a bathroom, get some water, and when I bring it back to her, I swear she's sleeping. I'm not gone more than maybe a couple of minutes, but she's sleeping; anyway, she looks like she's sleeping. It kind of shook me up."

"It's a trick of hers," I said thickly.

"What did you say, Doc?"

"A trick of hers."

"Trick?"

"Sort of . . . sort of a manner of escape."

"What the hell are you talking about, Doc?"

I rubbed dry lips together, flicking my tongue from corner to corner. "In the press of emergency," I said, gulping, coughing, seeking voice, "she can knock herself out—"

"Knock herself out?"

"Withdraw, go to sleep, rest, relax, a kind of self-induced hypnosis. She can black out, completely relaxed, for fifteen minutes, half hour, it's an out; a trick she learned as a kid—"

"Well, I don't know about no tricks. I come in with the water and she's laid out, sleeping-like." He wiped his face again, put the handkerchief away. "I touch her cheek, it's cool. She's alive, she's breathing, maybe it's sleep, but maybe it's some kind of coma, I'm a cop, not a doctor. So I make a bee-line for the phone and call the hospital. Figured I'd get you."

"You got me," I said.

"You ain't home, so I figured you for the day-duty. Kill two birds with one stone like that. Get a doctor for her, and get you home anyway. So you show up and that drunk starts babbling about how he killed her. 'Let him sweat,' I figure. We got no full signed statement from him yet. 'Let him sweat,' I figure. 'We need him in just the mental shape he's in.' But I wanted to tip you, take you in here and tip you. 'Wait a minute,' I called after you. 'Wait a minute.' But you didn't stop."

"No," I said, "I didn't stop."

"Who can blame you? Anyway, you fly up and me downstairs I'm still nervous. So after a few minutes I go upstairs by the bedroom door and then I know everything's okay."

"How?" I said.

"I hear you talking to her, and I hear her answering you, and I hear the two of you moving around, so I know everything's okay, and I come back downstairs. I'm an old hand in the business. Nasty mess like this, triangle-bit, you just don't bust in on the man and wife. Figured I'd wait for you to come down."

"Thank you, Mulloy."

"Okay if I go up and see her now? She in shape?"

"Never in better shape."

"I'll get that drunk out of your parlor first. I'll have Borden take him down to the house, get his statement signed and sealed before witnesses, after we get him safely packed away in the clink, we'll tell him she's not dead."

"Not dead," I said.

"Okay?" he said.

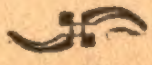
"Okay," I said

"I'll get him out of here, and then I'll go up for her statement, and then you're rid of all of us." His hand enclasped my arm. "Okay, let's go, Doc."

The hand on my arm shook me from my torpor—the first touch of the law upon the person of a murderer. "You go," I said. "I want no part of this; no part of him; no part of her; no part of any of this."

"Can't say I blame you," he said and he sighed and he turned and he lumbered from the kitchen and as he disappeared I broke for the back-entrance door and I ran.

But you cannot run forever.



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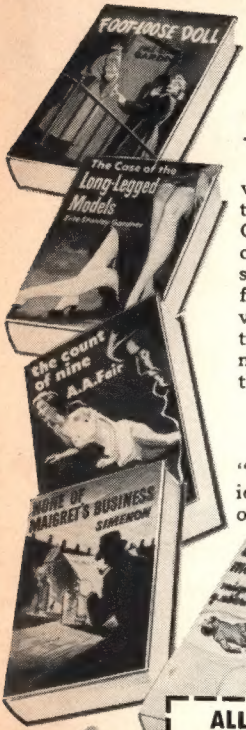

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